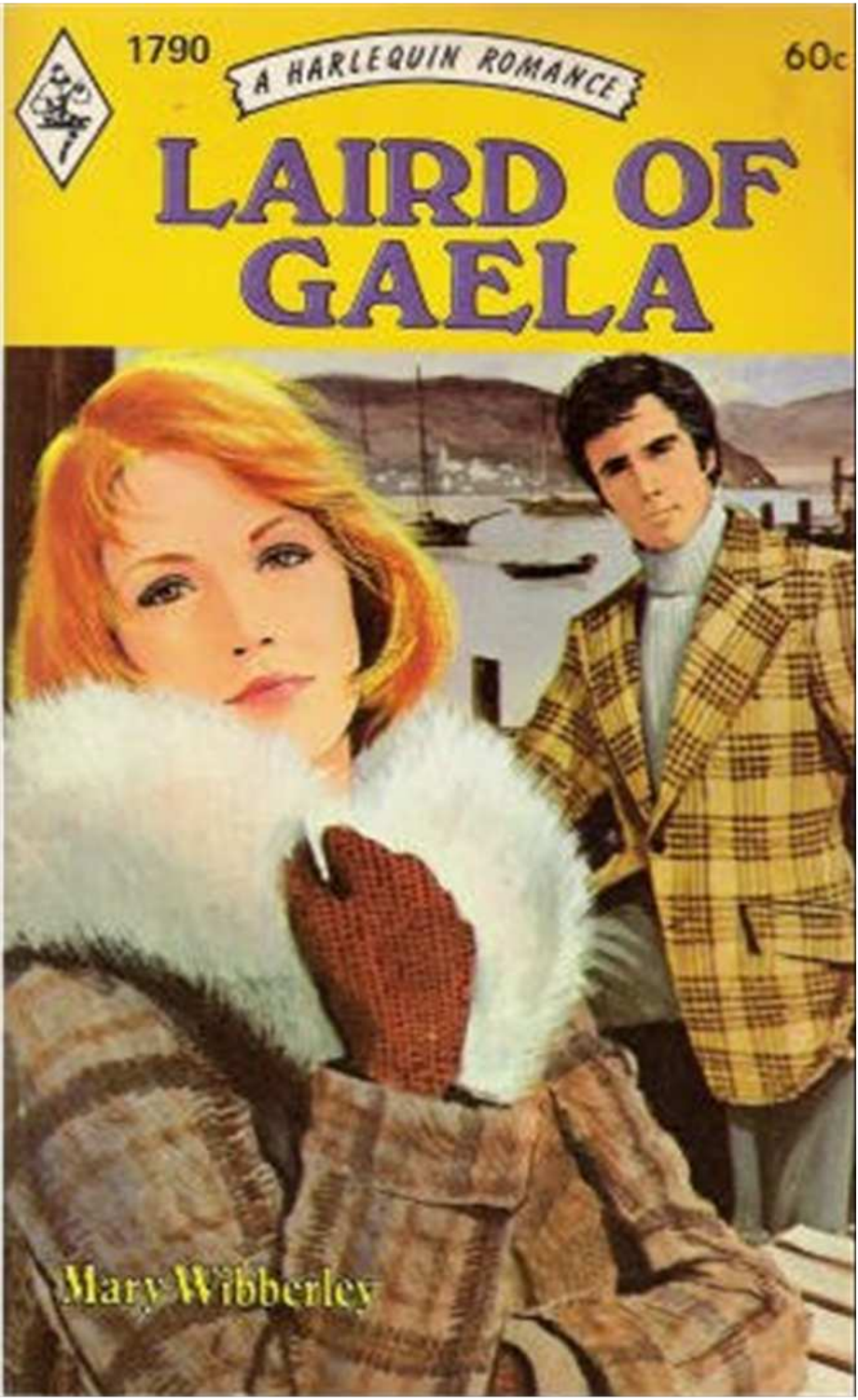
1790
A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE
60c
LAIRD OF GAELA
Mary Wibberley

LAIRD OF GAELA

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Sparks had flown between Tara Blaine and Jago Black from the moment they met -- sparks of antagonism, and something else.

But by the time Tara was admitting that she felt something more for him than dislike, she had discovered who he really was . .

CHAPTER ONE

TARA didn't see the man. It was difficult to see anything, for the mist had come down suddenly, and this, and the night, made an effective blanket to deaden both sight and sound. A boat's hooter blared distantly, and she shivered, suddenly cold. There had been a lost lonely tone about it that echoed her own mood.

She shrugged irritably and turned to look out from the quay. But there was nothing to see, only grey swirling ribbons of mist that swerved and curled down to the black oily water only feet away. If she should trip or stumble... Tara took a step back, and the sudden movement jarred her leg so that she winced. It also brought back the incident on the train from Inverness when she had stumbled against a suitcase jutting out into the centre aisle, and two youths had sniggered—and a man had been watching and seen what had happened, and that had upset Tara more than the youths' muffled guffaws—for they were the worse for drink, and didn't really count. But the man ... he had such an odd expression in his eyes—almost as if he *knew*. Tara had reddened and turned quickly away to find her seat. But the man's face had remained in her mind for a while after, despite her attempts to read the magazines she had bought.

The slap of water on stone brought her back to the dank and dismal present. There would surely be no ferry to Gaela tonight, and the sooner she booked a room at the hotel the better. Even on a damp January night there could be other travellers, and there was no other inn for several miles. She turned; a figure loomed up out of the mist, she felt her treacherous left leg let her down, felt the shoe slither helplessly on greasy stone—and then a man's hands were on her arms pulling her to safety, and a man's voice—almost amused—was saying:

'I don't think you'd enjoy a swim in that—not tonight anyway.' And Tara *knew* who it would be, even before she looked up. She had

never heard him speak before; there had been no need for words on the train—but the voice matched the face, and as she looked up into that man's eyes, she instinctively tried to pull herself free, her hand going to her cheek in a defensive gesture of protection lest he see the scar.

'I was all right. I wasn't going t-to- -' to her horror she found herself beginning to stammer.

'Looked like it to me—and I didn't fancy waiting until I had to *jump* in, you see?' There was no doubt about it, he was amused.

Tara felt her temper flare, but manners fought a brief battle with it, enabling her to say: 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. The ferry to Gaela stopped a couple of hours ago, by the way.'

They were on the stone road now to the inn. Tara stopped. 'How did you know -' she began, puzzled.

'Why else would you be looking out at this time? It *is* the only ferry to leave from here, isn't it? I want to get on it myself—but no go. Where are your cases?'

'I left them in the station waiting room while I went to see -'

'All right, I'll get them. You want to wait here or in the pub?'

'Just a minute, Mr—-'

'Black. Jago Black, Miss -?' There was an enquiring, polite tilt to the head she couldn't quite see clearly-—yet, and an air of suppressed amusement which she found quite intolerable.

'Mr Black, I'm quite capable of getting my own cases.' She had no intention of telling him her name either. But if he thought she was a cripple . . . One thing she could not abide was pity.

'I'm sure you are. But I'd hurry if I were you. There are only three bedrooms at the pub. I've got one, there was a very American couple asking about showers when I booked, so -' he shrugged.

Tara softened slightly. Maybe he *was* only trying to be polite. It was just that it was difficult to accept that a man, *any* man, could want to help her simply out of good manners and not from some misguided effort at gallantry.

Swallowing her pride—an effort, that—she said: 'Thanks for telling me. I'll be there in a moment.

Goodbye.' And she turned and left him outside the mist-shrouded inn, lights only dimly showing from behind thick yellow curtains, and walked on towards the station round the corner. She was aware that he remained standing there watching her before the mist swallowed him and the building, and Tara made an intense effort not to let the limp show. She was very conscious of it, and that didn't help, and she felt an unreasoning surge of resentment that he should have been witness to her humiliation on the train. To a man like him it had meant nothing. He spoke in a completely assured manner, he *walked* casually and confidently. What could he know of her agonies and doubts? Of the effort it had cost her to come alone so far to stay with her mother's cousin, because Lalla Baxter was the one person who didn't feel sorry for her, who treated her as *normal,* not as some freak who had not only been badly hurt in a crash but had been cruelly jilted as a result of that accident—just before the wedding.

Tara picked up her two heavy cases from the waiting room. Gaslight hissed softly, casting a soothing greeny-yellow light all around her as she went back to the door, and heartbreak, like some tangible pain,

halted her step so that she stood there for a few moments before going on. It had been eight months ago—almost to the day—but the awful nagging hurt was as real as ever, and she wondered what David was doing now. Her parents had said she was better off without him if he could do *that*—but they didn't understand. They tried, but they really didn't know. Lalla did, and she had made one of her rare visits to England from her Hebridean home for the sole purpose of cheering her niece up after the crash. And now Tara was going to stay with her for a couple of months, because Lalla needed assistance with a book, and Tara could type well and because Tara's mother, in desperation, had asked her cousin's help. This last fact was unknown to Tara. Out of the blue had come Lalla's letter, begging her to come and visit, and take pity on a poor middle-aged writer who couldn't cope.

It seemed the ideal solution. The doctor had been pleased that she should want to go away; Tara's mother too had been pleased—apparently surprised as well—and had even fooled her daughter, who perhaps because of her new bitterness had a sharp awareness of other people's intentions, and was not easily deceived.

And now she was here. But not quite. Gaela was only six miles away, but it could have been the other side of the world, because of all the mist, which effectively sealed it off from the mainland. And Lalla would be waiting, and guess that Tara would put up at the inn. It was no-use phoning, she knew. The island's only telephone was in a callbox outside the village post office, and whoever answered it would have to walk three miles to Lalla's house with the message.

Tara smiled reluctantly as she opened the waiting room door. Her mother had fyeen horrified when Lalla had first told her of the phoning arrangements. 'But, my dear,' she had protested, 'what on earth do you *do* when you want to call anyone?'

'Walk to the village with a pile of coppers clutched in my hot little hand,' had been Lalla's descriptive reply. 'And don't you see, it means

I can't be pestered by my agent—he gets mad, but at least I can get on with my writing in peace.'

She was near the hotel now. The cases were too heavy. She should have accepted the man's offer to ... 'No!' she told herself fiercely. 'Be independent. You'll have to learn some time. It might as well be now.' But she had to put them down on the smooth mist-dampened cobblestones for a few moments. The doctors had said it would be a year before her strength was regained. They hadn't said anything about the limp, except vague murmurings of: 'It'll go in time.' *They* didn't know what it felt like to be just that bit slower than everyone else, so that it was necessary to try harder. Tara gritted her teeth and picked up the cases again. She pushed open the door of the inn and a blast of hot paraffiny air met her as she went in. There was no sign of the man, for which she was profoundly thankful. There was no sign of anybody ...

She caught a glimpse of the pale ghost of a girl and moved slightly, startled—and realized it was a mirror, and that thin blonde creature with warm dark coat on was herself. Curiously she moved nearer to the glass, leaving the cases by the door. The shadows danced round her, the light from an oil lamp standing in the thick wooden bar wavery and yellow. What had he thought, her reluctant rescuer ? Had he noticed the scar as well? But she hadn't seen that flash of pity in his eyes that she had grown so used to looking for. She reached up her hand and ran a forefinger down it, round the curve of her jaw, a thin silver thread; all that was left after the plastic surgeon had done his work. All—but enough to remind her, every single time she saw her face, that it had been enough to drive David from her—David the perfectionist, who had tried to hide the mingled pity and horror on his face every time he came to visit her in that quiet hospital room. And in the end she had sent him away. He wouldn't take the ring— the price of his conscience, perhaps—so Tara had given it to the Oxfam shop, to do someone some good ...

'Good evening. Can I help you ?'

She heard the voice and turned to see a small thin man, presumably the innkeeper, standing by a door with a look of polite enquiry on his face.

'Oh, yes. Have you a room, please?'

He nodded slightly. 'There is one just. You have come from the train?' His accent was the soft familiar one she knew well from previous visits, so long, too long, ago...

'Yes. The ferry to Gaela isn't running, is it?' She had to hear it again, even if she already knew.

'Ach no, it is stopped these few hours past. But no doubt the morning will be fine again. Eh—these will be your cases?'

'Yes. Thank you.' He went to pick them up, and Tara waited, and followed him up the twisty stairs that led off from the side of the bar, and along a narrow passage. He stopped and pushed open a door which creaked alarmingly, to reveal a small bleakly furnished room. The bed looked warm though, and almost as if reading her mind, he said: 'My wife will put the bottles in for you. Eh, you'll be wishing to eat, no doubt?'

'Please.' She was starving. It must be the air, she thought. She hadn't felt so hungry for months.

'Aye well, there will be dinner in the dining room. I will away now.' And he was gone, melting away like a shadow and pulling the door shut after him. It creaked again, and she winced.

From near by came the sound of running water and a man's whistle, quiet but clear, rendering some pop tune that was annoyingly elusive. On a sudden impulse, Tara went to the wall and pressed her ear to it.

The sounds were instantly magnified, so the washbowl was just the other side of that thin partition, matching her own, beside her. She wondered if it was the American or the man who called himself—what was his name? Jango? she frowned—no, that wasn't it. Jago, yes. What a weird name—Jago Black. A weird name for a strange, unnerving man. She shivered and ran her finger round the shiny white bowl. He would probably be eating too, sitting near her in what was probably only a small dining-room—watching her—seeing her face. She fought down the feeling of sickness that rose in her throat. It didn't matter. It mustn't matter. He was a stranger, and she would not see him again after tomorrow. But there she was wrong.

Nearly twenty minutes had passed before Tara nerved herself sufficiently to go downstairs. During that time she had unpacked her nightie, careful not to disturb the other contents of her suitcase, brushed her silky blonde hair in such a fashion that if she held her head a certain way, the ends hid the scar. Then after a quick dab of lipstick she had gone to the stairs and paused for a moment, hearing the quiet sounds of the small hotel—a faint creak as a board moved in a floor somewhere—the distant clatter of crockery, and more distant still, a dog's deep-throated bark.

Gripping the curving handrail tightly, Tara made her way down. She wore the grey trouser suit in which she had travelled from home, her hair was fine and silky; the red satin scarf at her neck contrasting vividly with its soft gold, and her face, though slightly pale with the fatigue of the journey, was as beautiful as it had ever been, did she but know it, delicately moulded, her fine high cheekbones and widely set brown eyes softly feminine, as was the rich full mouth beneath the small straight nose. Once her eyes had been full of laughter. That was gone now, since eight months ago; now they were clouded with the bitterness she felt. Bitterness of rejection by the man she had loved—the man she thought had loved her. It had been a long job in hospital, five months in all, and David not there to see fier when she

finally came out, all scars healed, save one—and another, deep hurt—but that was inside, and couldn't be seen by anybody.

There were some locals in the bar, talking among themselves, and the voices became hushed as she paused again at the foot of the stairs, wondering which way to go.

'Would it be the dining room you are looking for?' one red-cheeked fisherman took his pipe from his mouth to ask her. You didn't often see beauty like that in Kirkgarron, and it would be interesting to see if the voice matched the face.

'Yes, please.' She could still smile, and did, and the fisherman saw that faint strip erf white on her chin, and wondered ...

'Aye, well. 'Tis that door away to your left, miss.' And he nodded as she thanked him, and began to walk in the direction his pipe was pointing.

The dining room was as small as she had feared, with one large table, to seat eight, in the centre, and four places set. But only one man sat there. Her reluctant rescuer, as Tara had dubbed him. He was concentrating on his soup and didn't see her at first. She touched a chair, ready to pull it out opposite him, and he looked up. Their eyes met briefly, and Tara received a distinct shock. She had not seen him properly before, either on the train or outside. But now she did. And her first thought was, absurdly: 'I don't like him!' But it was not because of the way he looked, or had acted, or anything else so real—it was an intangible sensation of being overwhelmed by some force stronger than she had met before.

He stood, briefly, politely, then sat down again as she did so, gave a brief nod towards the other chairs, and said: 'The Americans have gone out to take photos.'

His words were so unbelievable that Tara managed to forget the awful selfconsciousness his presence aroused in her. 'D-did you say photos—in *this}'*

There was no doubt about it, he seemed vastly amused by something. And his smile transformed that strong attractive face so that she took a deep breath, dismayed. She didn't like him, and that wasn't important, but she had to admit that he was a fascinating-looking animal.

'Yes. Perhaps I looked as surprised too, when they told me—for the man explained. They've got a camera that does everything except take X-ray photos, as far as I can make out. I saw it—come to think of it I wouldn't be surprised if it took those too. It's got flash attachments, infra-red lights, extension lens— just about everything. Must weigh a ton. They think this li'l ole weather's got such a fantastic atmosphere about it'—his voice had slid effortlessly into such an American twang at the last few words that Tara smiled reluctantly—'that they decided to go for a walk and take some snaps.' He broke a crusty roll in half thoughtfully, and a plump red- cheeked woman walked in with Tara's soup at that moment. After she had gone he added: 'That might prove interesting when they get home and have them developed.'

She looked up from her soup, puzzled. 'Why?'

A crooked grin flashed briefly. 'They might see things they didn't see when they took the photos.'

'Oh!' She bent quickly to her plate again, feeling a warm tide of colour rise from her throat. She was a fool to have asked! Tara closed her eyes, wishing she were anywhere but *there*—with *him.* Her spoon felt enormous, and she wondered if he were watching her drink her soup. Her appetite had suddenly gone entirely. And how would she manage the next half hour or so? She wished that the Americans

would come in from wherever they were, and take some of the intolerable strain that this man was imposing on her just by *being* there.

Then, mercifully, came a diversion. The plump woman came in again carrying a tray full of dishes, and in the following minutes, while plates and cutlery were being exchanged and moved, Tara was able to gulp down her soup—able too to watch the man Jago unobserved. He was looking up at the landlady, talking, asking her something about licensing hours ...

He was very dark, his hair long enough to touch the collar of the tartan shirt he wore under a chunky grey sweater, his mouth wide with that smile, the lower lip slightly thicker, slightly jutting above a strong square chin. His eyes were a dark brown, thickly lashed, imperceptibly slanted under thick brows that met in the middle above a nose that at one time looked as though it had lost an argument with a door, for there was an elusive, faintly battered look about it. Tara dragged her eyes quickly away, and down, as he half turned again. The whole effect was undeniably attractive in a strong virile way—he looked as though a rough-house would suit him down to the ground, and yet—no, she was mistaken—his hands were not those of a fighter. They were clean and tanned, the fingers long and well shaped, with short straight-cut nails at the end, speaking of a sedentary job. Not a man who lived by his hands...

Tara realized that the woman was speaking to her and looked. 'I'm sorry?' she said, flustered.

The woman smiled reassuringly. 'Will I take your plate, miss?'

'Oh, thank you.'

A few minutes later the door from the bar opened, and the two Americans, young, energetic, and tanned, came in exuding instant friendliness —and noise.

Soon afterwards Tara was able to make her escape, leaving them talking to Jago Black about the state of American roads as compared to British ones. In her room she leaned against the door and heaved a sigh of relief. At last she could relax. He had made a determined effort to draw Tara into the conversation, but she had politely avoided being involved. She didn't want to talk to anyone, didn't want to meet strangers who frightened her because they looked afraid of nothing. She moved restlessly away from the door and sat on the bed. Eight o'clock, and she should phone her mother soon, and then she would go to bed, for it had been a long tiring journey from her home in Cheshire, and she was feeling more tired than she usually did because of what had happened, and the strain of having to talk to him .

There came a sharp rap on the door, and Tara swung her feet to the floor before calling: 'Come in.' She thought—the landlady with a lovely hot water bottle to warm the bed ... But then her hand touched a warm patch at roughly the place where her feet would go inside the bed; the door opened, and the subject of her thoughts came in.

'Oh!' Tara gasped in astonishment and dismay.

Jago Black smiled, gave a brief incisive glance round, taking everything in, and said: 'Sorry if I disturbed you. I wondered if you'd like to come for a drink in the bar?'

'For a drink?' She could only repeat it foolishly.

'Yes. With the Americans and me.'

'I—no—thank you.' Her fingers clutched the tartan coverlet convulsively. 'I'm going to bed soon.'

He cocked one thick black, *disbelieving* eyebrow. 'At eight? It's a bit early, isn't it?'

Tara swallowed. What did one have to do to get rid of a man like him? And why had he asked her to go for a drink? Was he feeling sorry for her? Quickly she answered: 'I've been travelling for hours, and I'm really rather tired.' She wanted to get up, to make him leave the room, but was unable to move; it was as though something held her back —as if she didn't want to *walk* near him, to let him see...

'Aren't we all?' He shrugged. 'However, if you're really decided'—he looked round, and his expression clearly conveyed what he thought of people who preferred poky hotel rooms to warmth and drinks— 'I won't push it. I don't stay where I'm not wanted.' Then he added softly: 'As we're going to be neighbours, it seemed the neighbourly thing to do.'

Something in the way he said it stung Tara. Almost insolent, his tone implied that he hadn't *really* expected otherwise. She retorted: 'Don't you mean you were doing your good deed for the day? Well, you've done it—you *asked.* Now you can go and enjoy your drink with a clear conscience.' She didn't know what had made her say the sarcastic bitter words, only that he looked such an assured, supremely confident man, as if nothing could ever touch him, that she had the absurd urge to try.

There was a brief silence, then he looked at her— slowly—his glance travelling from head to toe and back. Hard brown eyes held hers in a glance of pure steel.

'Tell me,' he asked softly, 'are you always so sorry for yourself?'

She stood up and went towards him, demanding angrily: 'How dare you!' She stopped then because, most disconcertingly, he showed no sign of retreating, but stood his ground, giving her no choice. 'Please go—now.' Tears sprang to her eyes. Tears of tiredness and the weakness she still felt.

'I'm going, don't worry.' He turned on his heel, and paused with his hand on the door. 'Good night, sleep well.' Then he was gone, and the door shut firmly behind him. Horribly shaken, Tara collapsed on the bed again. What an *awful* man 1 And she remembered something he had said—'as we're going to be neighbours -' What an odd thing, she thought. As if staying in the same hotel in adjoining rooms had any significance! But she was to remember again his words soon afterwards, and know their true meaning—and she would be even more puzzled.

Wearily she lay back, and saw again his face, as it had been just before he left, and she shivered. Most oddly, she had been almost frightened—almost scared of a perfect stranger who meant nothing to her, nothing at,all. But deep down she knew it was because of what had happened, first on the train, then at the slippery quayside, and Tara turned her head first this way, then that, in despair. Would she, she wondered, ever forget the humiliation?

Tara stood on the quayside again. It was nearly eight-thirty, and the night had gone, taking the damp fog with it, leaving instead a fine drizzling rain... that was rapidly soaking into her warm dark coat. There was nobody else in sight, save distantly a boy on a bike, whistling tunelessly as he delivered papers, the sound carrying shrilly over the iron-hard wet cobbles. Overhead a gull wheeled, shrieking, and Tara shivered with the cold. What a way to begin her stay! There was one consolation. She hadn't seen Jago Black at all, and the boat

was coming nearer over calm rain-spattered water, its engine noisy, black smoke rising from the brave red funnel.

Just a few more minutes, and she would be aboard. The prospect was infinitely attractive. There was a tiny cabin on the boat, providing shelter, and Tara would sit in it, safe and warm, and watch Kirkgarron recede, and feel a sense of freedom ...

Nearer and nearer it came, and now she saw the ferry pilot, a huge Scot resplendent in shiny oilskin and sou'wester, standing at the wheel. She looked around, for one last reassuring sight of the hotel, and everything was silent. And then she saw the front door open, saw a tall dark figure step ,out, heard shouted farewells—and she turned away, closing her eyes in sudden despair. 'Oh, no!' she whispered. It was him—who else would it be? He seemed to be following her, almost like a shadow. Resignedly she looked out over the water, the fine rain beading her face, making it damp and cold. Another half hour at least, together in the tiny cabin with nowhere to look save out of the windows—or at each other. With a quick movement, Tara felt in her bag for the magazine she had put there at the end of her train journey. She would have to 'hide' behind that. Better than nothing, and yet—he would guess, and there would be that half amused look again.

'Good morning.' The voice came from behind her, and she had to turn to answer him.

'Good morning.' He wore a hooded anorak of dark blue, and black trousers. The only luggage he carried was a blue holdall which looked precariously full. Good! Although it seemed incredible, he must have only come for the day. Tara's face must have showed some slight expression of relief, for she heard a soft laugh and looked sharply at the man. But his face was innocent of anything save a pleasant, studied blankness.

'Boat's nearly here,' he remarked. 'You missed a good time in the bar last night.'

'Really?' She half turned away, to let him know she had no intention of continuing the conversation. 'I'm glad you enjoyed it.' It was an effort to speak to him, and she watched the boat bump against the old car tyres that lined the jetty, then bump again, and the pilot was out and fastening his rope almost immediately.

'Ye'll away on board,' he called, 'and I'll be back the moment.' And he stumped off towards the post office which nestled against the hotel.

He had grinned at Jago Black—Tara had seen it —as if he knew him. She bit her lip, then, as a hand came on her arm, stiffened.

'What? -' she began.

'I'm getting wet. Do you want to get on board or not?'

'Yes, but -'

'Go *on*. I'll throw your cases on after you.' And to Tara's horror, she was swung up and over the side on to the slippery deck of the boat. Before she had time to think about it, her cases followed her, skidding slightly on the Vet deck, then coming to rest against the raised ledge before the cabin steps. Jago Black landed lightly beside her, and Tara bent to pick up her cases before he offered again, then took them down the three steps and stowed them beside the door.

The rain had grown heavier. It drummed on the cabin roof, and the windows were as she remembered them, salt-encrusted, translucent. The seat that ran all the way round in a giant horseshoe shape was shiny and hard, but it wouldn't be for long. Tara glanced carefully, discreetly, at the man who - was settling himself in, Unzipping his anorak, sitting down, pulling a paper from his pocket... A gentle sigh

escaped her. So he didn't feel like talking either. Perhaps he'd got the message at last. Tara sat facing him, wondering if anyone else would come, and she lifted the magazine from her bag and began to read. At least she tried to, but something was disturbing her concentration, and she found her eyes going over the same advertisement, again and again, until at last she looked up briefly—to see Jago Black's eyes on her.

She took a deep breath and felt herself colour. Quickly she looked down again, but the words danced crazily round to the rhythm of her heartbeats. She swallowed hard.

'Sorry. Did you think I was staring?' He had an uncanny ability to read thoughts apparently!

'Yes. Weren't you?' she answered shortly, only stopping herself by an effort from adding: 'I wish you'd go away!'

But she had to look at him, and somehow the most maddening thing about him was his expression. He shook his head. Those brown eyes were darker still in the close shadowy confines of the small cabin, and his face was stronger. But he smiled slowly—and his teeth were very white against the darkness of his features.

'I was trying to do the crossword,' and he tapped his newspaper carelessly. 'Yesterday's, but it's still annoying me. Are you any good at them?'

She was torn between a blunt refusal and the honest curiosity roused in her by the question. She had done a lot of them in hospital, and the habit had stuck, so that now she usually managed to finish the daily paper crossword in ten minutes. And it was always a challenge to hear something that someone couldn't do—in case *you* could.

Weakly, knowing she shouldn't, she said: 'What are you stuck on?' He looked down, and she wasn't sure if she had imagined the slight grin before his face vanished.

'Here—I wish they had a light in this darned boat —"Stringy feline's bed." It's two words of four and -'

'Cat's cradle?'

'What?' he looked down at the paper, then accusingly at Tara. 'You've already done it!' he said.

'No,' she shook her head. 'Honestly I haven't. Sometimes they just come like that.'

He shook his head wonderingly. 'Amazing! You know,. I've been looking at that for ages.' He handed her the paper. 'Just take a look at two down, will you? I'm damned if I can see what it is.'

Too late she realized what was happening. Even as she lifted the paper to see the clue in what little light came from the windows, he moved across beside her. Tara froze instantly, her face showing her feelings. He appeared not to notice, but was fumbling in his anorak pocket. 'Ah, that's it.' He produced a pen, and just then they heard the deep rumble of engines; a light overhead flickered once or twice, then came on fully, making her blink after the dimness. And the cabin lurched and jerked as the boat swung round. Tara felt herself sliding helplessly sideways with the sudden movement, and put her arm out in an attempt to steady herself on the back of the seat. Jago Black's hand came across her waist, pulling her back towards him as the boat lurched again, then settled itself, so that the only sensation of motion was the deep throbbing of the motors behind them.

With an abrupt, jerky movement, she put her hand to her waist and took hold of his fingers. 'Take —take your hands off me!' she

breathed. Immediately he did so, and moved slightly away. Then he looked at her.

'Did you think I was going to try and seduce you? I'd have a job in here, wouldn't I?' He gave a short laugh. 'I thought you were going to slide off on to the floor, and with -' he stopped, too suddenly. Tara knew what he had been about to say.

'With my bad leg, you mean—the one that lets me down? You don't need to be so tactful, Mr Black. It would be difficult for you not to have noticed, wouldn't it?' She felt as if she were choking, and her hands tightened helplessly.

He said softly: 'Why are you so bitter about it? It's not very noticeable -'

'Please!' She turned sideways so that she was facing him. 'Please spare me the platitudes. What do *you* know? What is it to do with you?' She swept the soft blonde hair back from her face and pointed to the scar, whiter now, she knew, because of the anger which was making her cheeks pink. 'Take a good look here as well while you're at it, then you won't need to pretend about that.'

Instead of looking away, he did just as she told him, leaned nearer and looked closely at the thin silver line traced along her jawline. Angrily she let her hair fall back, an impotent rage filling her, nearly choking her again. 'Satisfied?' she managed to say, with a great effort.

'It'll fade in time,' he answered.

'Will it? I suppose you're an expert on these things. That's what they said—-but they don't have to live with it, do they? Nor do you.'

'You make it worse for yourself, you know,' he remarked. 'Is that why you wouldn't come down to the bar last night ?'

The helpless anger refused to go away. If only she didn't feel so weak, she would be better able to defend herself against this subtle attack—this cunning wearing away of all her shreds of confidence. It was probably this that made her answer sharply: 'Can't you just take "no" for an answer? Do I h-have to h-have a reason?' She held her hands tightly together on her lap. The newspaper lay on the seat between them—and it was that which had started it all, in a way. She wanted to hand it to him, to tell him to take it and leave her alone. If only she didn't feel so completely helpless. If only ... 'No, of course not. But you're fighting all the time, aren't you? No one's fighting *you*, so why don't you relax and -'

'Shut up! Leave me alone!' Tears glinted in her eyes as she swung round on him. Tension pulsated in the air of that tiny compartment, with barely room to move, and he looked at her, that strong face full of a kind of gentle concern that filled her with sudden overwhelming anger. Tara's breast heaved. Who *was* he? She hated him, she knew that. Hated him for seeing through her disguise—and for daring to *speak* about it. That was the worst thing, hearing the words, not being able to fight them.

And then he did something very surprising. He reached out his hand and *touched the scar*. 'Just listen to me a minute,' he said.

Tara knocked his hand away with a sudden desperate movement and stood up. 'Don't ever ,t-touch me again,' she whispered. 'How *dare* you!'

He stood up too, and they faced each other, and the cabin bristled with electricity like a live current between them. His eyes held hers, boring down, dark, lit by a black flame that threatened to consume her. And she was frightened by what she saw. A muscle tightened in

his cheek, his chin jutted dangerously. 'Let us see,' he said softly, and taking her completely by surprise, pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Too stunned to pull away for a few astounding moments, Tara found herself relaxing against a strong hard body—then realizing, horrified and dismayed at her reaction, pulled herself free with a desperate effort and caught him a stinging slap on his face. She turned, hand to mouth, and stumbled up the steps to the icy slippery deck.

She clutched the rail, and the rain washed away the taste of that kiss. She found she was trembling as she saw Gaela loom darkly out of the rainy mist, and a sob rose in her throat. Why had he done it? What madness had possessed him? For she had seen his face, in that instant before he had held her, and in it had been a strange and puzzling look. Not of pity, or anything like it. But something she could not—did not want to recognize.

Grey dots resolved themselves into houses, and the pilot, thinking no doubt that the mad English passenger had come on deck to see the sights, obliged with: 'Yonder is Gaela, miss. Eh, you'll be staying there a while?'

'Yes, for a while.' She would have to go down for her bag and cases, and pay her fare. But not yet. Let him come up first. She hoped, childishly, that she had hurt him. She had put all her strength into the slap, but he had scarcely moved. It was almost as if he had expected the blow.

She saw a small lone figure swathed in raincoat and sou'wester, and a laugh struggled with a sob. She waved, and the figure waved back, and there came a faint cry floating over the water. Nearly there, and then she would be able to forget him.

Minutes later the boat bumped against the wooden jetty and the pilot lassooed a bollard with the skill born of years at sea.

'I'll get my cases,' Tara shouted, and turned back, and bumped right into the man who had silently come up behind her. Then something terrible happened. As she moved past him, she heard Lalla cry with astonishment: 'Jago! Why didn't you *tell* me?' And Tara turned again, not believing her ears, half watching the boatman stump down into the cabin, but half watching Lalla and *him*. Jago Black, leaning over the side to shake her aunt's hand, Jago Black saying: 'I wasn't sure if I could get away. It's nice to see you again.'

The next few minutes were busily spent paying, transferring her luggage over the side, being assisted over by the helpful pilot, then standing beside her aunt, who had Jago at the other side of her. And Lalla looked at Tara, her face beaming. 'You've already met. Isn't it lovely! Tara, this is Jago Black. Jago, my cousin's daughter, Tara Blaine -' And Jago, his face showing nothing save polite blankness, held out his right hand and said:

'How d'you do?' But his left hand went to his cheek to stroke it momentarily, and Tara could barely look at him. Uppermost in her mind was the thought: They're like old friends!

But there was worse to come. She didn't find out until she reached Lalla's house.

CHAPTER TWO

LALLA paid the driver after he had carried Tara's cases into her large, very comfortable, and warm living room. Then she shut the door, and they heard the rumble of the ancient taxi—the island's one and only—as Hamish started up, and went along the road back to the village. He would be whistling—he rarely stopped—and Lalla smiled. 'I've had more comfortable rides, but at least he's always there when you want him.' She patted the settee. 'Sit down, Tara. I'll put the kettle on for coffee. I've pulled this up close to the fire for you—what a perfect pig of a day, isn't it?—and then you must tell me all about your journey, and meeting Jago— fancy that!'

She was half way along the passage that led to the kitchen before she finished talking, and Tara smiled. She didn't obey her aunt's instructions to sit. Instead she followed her out, and watched her fill the kettle and lift down the biscuit tin. Lalla would never change. She looked the same now as she always had, small and wiry, dressed in a blue trouser suit, her hair a little greyer, still swept back, because it had a natural curl which she hated. She had a beaky nose and strong chin, and would be the first to admit that she was not—-nor ever had been—a beauty. But she had attributes infinitely more important; a kind and generous nature, devastating wit, and a realistic approach to life that was very reassuring to Tara. She shook her head now, bemused as ever that from the pen of this small middle-aged woman tripped fast-moving thrillers that had kept thousands on the edges of their seats for the past ten years or more. The name Damien Corbett stayed comfortably in the centre of the best-seller lists, and none of the readers knew that the adventures of the full- blooded, sexy heroes had actually come from the head of a woman.

'It's lovely to be here again,' Tara said, leaning in the doorway, beginning to relax after the strain and tension of the last few days of preparations—and that awful man.

'Lovely to have you—but you know that already. And I've so much work for you to do—yoil might change your mind in a day or so when I get you at it.'

Tara laughed. 'I doubt it. I'll be glad to get started again—and you know, I'd love to be able to actually read a Damien Corbett without buying or borrowing it.'

'Idiot!' Lalla turned from the cupboards where she was busily setting out cups and plates. 'You'll be disappointed. It's not half as interesting in handwriting. Anyway,' she pursed her mouth, 'never mind *work*! What about *you* meeting Jago—what a surprise to see you both getting off that old boat! You could have knocked me down with a feather.'

Tara moved uneasily. What on earth could she say about him? 'Yes,' she admitted slowly, 'you did look astonished.' Arid so was I, she added inwardly; stunned would be more like it. But Lalla's next words were even more of a blow. Oblivious to Tara's strained expression, she went on: 'It's even more of a surprise to me because I'm putting him in this new book. He doesn't *know,* of course—that would be fatal—but with him living next door, I'll be able to -' she stopped at Tara's gasp of sheer horror.

' What on earth is it ? Are you ill ?'

'D-did you say *next* door?' Her mouth could barely frame the question.

'Why, yes! He's not here often, of course—comes, oh, I would say every three of four months for a few weeks and then vanishes. Oddly enough, he was here just before Christmas—Tara, what *is* it?'

Tara shook her head. 'It's terrible. I didn't think I'd see him after today—oh dear! Oh, Lalla, he's awful—when I—we—saw you—I'd

just slapped his face hard!' She blurted the words out, unable to keep the dreadful truth in any longer, and she wasn't prepared for Lalla's reaction. The older woman dropped the biscuit tin lid with a clatter and whirled round, her face lit with an impish smile. 'How *priceless!* What on earth had he done? Tell me, I'm all agog!'

It was half an hour later, and they were both sitting by the fire. Empty coffee cups and a plate with just one biscuit stood in the hearth as Tara wriggled her toes and stretched again. The story had been told, and now she felt much better.

'I thought you'd have known he lived near at any rate, when I offered him a lift in the taxi,' Lalla remarked as she lit another cigarette and threw the match into the heart of the flames.

'I suppose it didn't register. I was still getting over the first shock,' Tara admitted ruefully. 'Lalla, what is he exactly? I'm a bit—well, you know, frightened of him. I can't explain it, but he makes me—w-worse in a way, I suppose.'

'Mmm, yes? Do you know, I haven't a clue myself,' Lalla confessed. 'All I know is that he appeared about three years ago, right out of the blue, moved in next door, asked me if I knew of a cleaning woman—so I told him about Morag, and she's looked after him ever since, when he comes. That's why I was so surprised to see him. He usually writes to her a few days before he comes so that she can clean and air the place—and she tells me, of course. In fact,' she added thoughtfully, 'if anyone knows anything about him, it'll be her. She's a dear woman, but the most incredibly nosey creature I've ever met!'

They both laughed, but Tara's was tinged with dismay. There was something else she had to ask. 'He—when he's here, what does he do? Er—do you see a lot of him?'

Lalla gave Tara her shrewd look. 'You don't fool me with that innocent air, my girl. What you mean is, will *you* see much of him when he's here?'

'I suppose I did,' admitted Tara ruefully. 'You're too clever I'

'Well, actually, I hate to say it, but it's virtually open house when he's here. Of course he knows I write every morning without fail, and he wouldn't dream of ever coming in then, but—well'—she chuckled—'he fascinates me, and I encourage him like mad. He's a most interesting talker, and we often go on for hours, arguing about this and that, and putting the world to rights—you know.'

Tara's heart sank. 'But how come you've never found out about him? I mean, people do talk about themselves, don't they? And as you know him so well -' and she bit her lip.

'He just said once that he had a very demanding job, and that when he comes here, it's to relax completely. I took the hint. You would have, wouldn't you?'

Tara nodded. 'Yes.' She gave a little shiver. 'There's something very—mysterious about a man like him, though.'

'I *know*, my dear. Why do you think I've got him as the main character in this new book? It's some thing completely new for me—not a thriller—I'm having a rest from those—it's going to be a family saga, spanning several generations, with dozens of characters and lots of things happening. I'm itching to get on with it, and seeing him here again unexpectedly—well, that's a bonus, I can tell you.'

Tara was silent. Dismay filled her at the thought of Lalla using *him* as a character in a book—she didn't understand why, but she resented the idea very much. Jago Black had refused Lalla's offer of a lift in the taxi. He had said that he had some shopping to do, and to see

Morag, the woman who cleaned for him—but Tara knew that part of his reason for refusing was connected with her. And she went cold. A suddenly lost sensation encompassed her. She had come up here to escape—but from what? And would she ever be able to escape from herself?

She looked down at her hands on her lap. They were clasped tightly together. She had begun to relax before—but they had started talking about *him,* and some of the tension had come back. She must try, she knew, must try to relax here, and become normal—or as normal as she would ever be again— for if she didn't manage it, what was there in the future?

'Oh, Lalla,' she said softly, 'help me.' The words were a soft murmur, a plea from the heart, but Lalla heard, and put a hand round Tara's shoulder.

'I will, my dear. Truly I will—you'll see.' But her kind eyes were troubled.

Tara's bedroom was at the back of the large cottage, and looked towards the higher ground leading up to the centre of the island. The landscape was bleak and lonely, wild, rugged—and heartstirringly beautiful. Tara didn't know what it was about the place that always affected her so—she had been to stay only twice before, the most recent being four years previously, at the age of sixteen—but the memories had stayed vividly with her throughout the time between, and she knew instinctively why her aunt was able to write there as nowhere else. She sat oh the deep window embrasure and looked out. Lunch was over, her clothes were nearly unpacked, and she was having a rest for a few minutes, for she tired easily.

Tara ran her hand along the window-frame. The window was open, and the bright yellow curtains stirred slightly at her side. The rain had stopped at last, and a wintry sun struggled through the clouds. There was always the sound of water, the spring that came down from the mountain and grew in strength as it neared the house and the shed where the dynamo whirred permanently, supplying Lalla with the constant electricity she needed. She had had the machinery installed when she had first bought the house more than ten years previously. She had made other improvements too, having Central heating put in, as well as the open fire in the living room, so that even in the coldest, bleakest winter, there was warmth and hot water. One of the four bedrooms was her writing room, with desk, chair, and typewriter, and the piles of exercise books that she used at fantastic speed. The house was furnished well and comfortably, and as Tara looked round her she suddenly remembered the house next door, separated only by a thin strip of path. She had been in there on her last visit, when it had been empty, and been stunned by the contrast between it and Lalla's. The walls had been crudely plastered, discoloured by years of peat smoke, the rooms dank and gloomy —especially after leaving Lalla's brightly painted ones. Tara looked over at Jago Black's back garden, and wondered if he had done much to the cottage since buying it— how long? four years ago. It had had no electricity either, and someone had left an oil lamp on a rickety table by the window. That, and a chair, had been the only items of furniture left.

Later Tara asked her aunt about it. 'Has he had electricity put in next door?' she said after dinner.

Lalla shook her head as she pushed her chair slightly back from the table. 'No. I did ask him when he first came, but he said he preferred to use the lamps—I must say I thought it a bit odd myself. I mean, it would be the first thing I'd think of— what say you?'

Tara nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes. What's it like inside? His house, I mean?'

Lalla smiled. 'He'll show you round if you ask him—no, I was only joking, child, don't look so dismayed. Quite pleasant, actually. A bit bare for my taste—but then men aren't so bothered about those little touches we find essential. He's got a fitted carpet—red, I think, good furniture, some quite old—and lots of books—books all over the place. It's a wonder they don't get damp in winter when he's not here—in fact I told him as much, and he's had Morag light a fire every few days when she comes here ever since. And that's all. He seems a man of simple tastes, I would think—but very interesting all the same.'

'Mmm,' Tara wasn't committing herself to an opinion. 'He must have bought it through the solicitors you dealt with in Inverness.'

Lalla lifted her eyebrows. 'You know, I suppose he must! I never thought about that. He just arrived one day, introduced himself, and spent the next couple of weeks supervising the arrival of his things from the mainland. Both these houses—and a few others in the village—originally belonged to Angus Cameron, the old laird, who died just before I moved here. I suppose the solicitors must have advertised Jago's and he bought it.' She sighed. 'You know, you.'ve got me curious again. I must ask him in and try some discreet pumping!'

'Don't you dare !' Yet Tara was only slightly reassured by the gleam in her aunt's eye as she spoke. She knew her too well. She tried to change the subject. She wasn't sure anyway why she should be so curious about *him.* The less she had to do with him the better. 'You mentioned the old laird who died— was he the one who lived in the Big House?'

'That's the one.' Lalla sighed. 'That would make a story all right!' She filled her cup from the coffee pot and pointed to Tara's, who shook her head. 'That beautiful old house just mouldering away— it's painful to think of it.'

'I know. I walked up there when I last came,' Tara said. 'There was something ghostly, rather pathetic about the place. It's enormous, isn't it?'

'Yes. About fifteen bedrooms, as well as all the usual entertaining rooms downstairs-—and a portrait gallery round the landing -'

Portraits? Something, an elusively faint memory, stirred in Tara's brain, and then was gone as her aunt continued: 'And a conservatory that's all overgrown with weeds.'

'It's a wonder the windows haven't all been broken,' said Tara, 'or have they by now?'

Lalla shook her head. 'No. There are no vandals on Gaela, thank the Lord! It'll stay like that until it's sold, or moulders away from age.'

Tara shivered, suddenly sad. And inside her was born the determination to go again to the old Big House before her visit ended. For something, buried deep inside her mind, was puzzling her, but she couldn't for the life of her think just what it was.

The next day was Sunday, and Tara was woken by her aunt drawing back the curtains with a flourish to let in clear, if watery sunlight.

'Good morning! Did you sleep well?' she asked brightly.

Tara groaned and tried to sit up. ' 'Morning, Lalla. Oh! I must have slept like a log—I feel as if I've been unconscious for *hours'*

Lalla laughed. 'That's the Gaela air. It has that effort at first. You'll soon get used to it—and it's good for you anyway.'

'I'm sure it is.' Tara saw the cup of tea steaming gently away on her bedside chair. 'Oh, you're an angel!'

'I know, dear. It's just to wake you up. We're going to church.'

'Oh! But—I -' Tara began, that old familiar panicky feeling rising inside her at the thought of meeting people.

'No "buts"—you'll enjoy it, honestly! We have a travelling preacher, name of MacMurdo, from the mainland once every three weeks, and he's a darling! A bit of the old hellfire and brimstone school, but everybody goes when he's there. They call him the missionary, by the way—so don't go getting confused and thinking you're in darkest Africa!' And she went out, leaving Tara to drink her tea in peace. She knew what Lalla was doing—and strangely she didn't mind. With her mother, and other well- meaning relatives and friends, attempts to 'bring her out of herself had tended to make Tara retreat more into her shell, but about Lalla there was something so irrepressibly right that she found herself looking forward—almost—to listening to the missionary.

An hour later they were dressed and ready to walk to the church, which was about two' miles down the road, towards the village. Tara looked ruefully down at her feet, clad in a pair of wellingtons. There was no such thing as dressing up for church on a Sunday on Gaela. The road was too bad for shoes, and as there was always the possibility of rain, berth wore old mackintoshes over their coats, and sou'westers on their heads. Tara smiled at her aunt. 'And I brought all my nice clothes,' she said, in mock dismay.

Lalla laughed. 'There'll be time to wear them later. You'd ruin decent shoes on this road—and it'll likely rain before long. Right? All ready? Good. Let's go,' and she closed the door firmly behind them. They walked past Jago Black's cottage, still and silent, as if he slept, past the thick clumps of pines that bordered the road on either side.

'Now you'll tell me if I go too fast for you,' Lalla said. 'And I'll slow down.' There were no tactful hints with Lalla, no embarrassed sidelong glances at Tara's weaker leg, just a plain comment, and Tara didn't mind at all.

'I will,' she assured her. 'But I can walk well without getting tired. It's just sometimes, if I turn suddenly -'

'I know,' Lalla nodded. 'I think you'll find the walking is good exercise. I find it so, anyway. I wouldn't have a car if you *paid* me. Of course, I can't drive -' and her laugh was so infectious that Tara had to join in.

They had both sobered before reaching the small corrugated iron building that was Gaela's only church. It was ugly on the outside, not much less so on the inside, with plain benches set in rows either side of a centre aisle, and a dark painted table at the fronts Tara glanced curiously round as the islanders filed in, their faces rapt and pious. It was hard to believe what Lalla had told her on the way, that it was for them one of the big social occasions of the month, that a lot of surreptitious gossiping was done before, during, and after the service, and that it was the practice for the congregation to pass round 'sweeties', usually mints or humbugs, to suck during the duller parts.

So fascinated was she that she wasn't aware of the man sitting down on the bench in front of her aunt, of their whispered voices, until she felt a slight nudge in her ribs from Lalla. Then she looked, and stiffened in shock. Jago Black was sitting there, as large as life, dressed in the blue anorak with **Wel**lingtons over his black trousers. She froze as he looked round, perhaps sensing her eyes on him, barely able to answer his brief greeting, and then saw her aunt's apologetic grimace as if to say: 'I didn't know—honestly.'

Tara looked round, wondering why he had sat there just in front of them. But there was no other room. He had had no choice. Lalla

waited until his attention was claimed by an elderly islander in front of him, and whispered: 'I've never seen him here before.'

'No?' Tara whispered. She hadn't expected to see him either, and if she had known . . . Her thoughts were interrupted as there was a shuffling and coughing, and the entire congregation stood up at the entry of the missionary, a tall gaunt man with burning eyes and a wild shock of grey hair. He started off the service in fine style by thumping the table loudly and asking if any of them had seen the devil that week. Tara felt an approving murmur run round the people gathered, a kind of 'ah, this is it' ripple.

Lalla nudged her. 'He's in good form today,' she whispered. 'You'll see.'

And indeed he was. Coughing and whispering ceased as if by magic, and only the faint scent of drying macs and peppermints arose as sixty or more jaws sucked silently and raptly on their 'sweeties'. But oddly Tara didn't concentrate on the missionary as much as she should have. Instead her eyes seemed to be on Jago. Of course he was in direct line between her and Mr MacMurdo, but even so, she was slightly annoyed with herself for finding that she was looking so frequently at him. She didn't want to, and yet . . . The hood of his anorak was down, and his hair grew very thick and straight and almost black. She could see his profile clearly—a good profile, a strong outline that showed strength and character, especially in that stubborn cleft chin. And he had kissed her . . . Tara went warm, then cold, because she knew that he hadn't done it for the normal reasons that a man kisses a woman. It had been almost as if—he had been conducting a cold-blooded experiment. Her lips tightened angrily at the thought. The utter *arrogance* of the man! She was glad she had hit him now, although afterwards she had regretted her impulsive act. He had deserved it, hadn't he? she asked herself, but there was no answer, only her quickened heartbeat and breathing as she relived those few startling moments. And there came another memory,

perhaps even more startling. He had said something, in her hotel room, about them being neighbours. She hadn't understood it then—but now, looking back, it seemed to have been astonishingly prophetic. Had he known who she was? But how could he? How *could* he?

Tara stole a quick glance at Lalla as the preacher's words thundered around them. The older woman's face was rapt, intent, as indeed was everyone else's—save possibly Tara, who had more urgent thoughts churning inside her. Had Lalla known he would be coming? No, she had been genuinely surprised—and pleased—when she had seen him beside Tara on the ferry from the mainland. What then? Tara looked down at her lap, trying desperately to concentrate on the missionary's words. He was now on the evils of drink and dancing, and one or two feet were being shuffled a little uneasily. And Jago—what did he think about all this? Had he come because he had heard it was good entertainment? For Tara couldn't see him as a man who would attend church—yet she did not know him—not at all. And it was at that moment, with sinking heart, that she realized that in all probability they would have him as company on the journey home.

The rain started when they were a few hundred yards from home. Not gently, but with a sudden roar and bucketing fury that was as strong as it was unexpected. After the first gasping surprise they all started to run, and the already muddy road had become a washy brown quagmire in seconds. Huge drops leapt upwards again from the slippery brown mud beneath their feet and Tara felt herself skidding, then with a gasp, righted herself. Lalla was slightly ahead, laughing, and had not seen. But Jago must have, for he slowed his step and reached back to grab Tara's hand with his own. For a second she resisted, then helplessly, unable to thwart that firm grip, let her fingers curl round those stronger brown ones. She was caught up in his flight, her own legs surer now—and not afraid of falling, either.

The pain was there, but she ignored it, and out of the sheets of water surrounding them in almost solid waterfall-like walls, she saw the houses emerge. Lalla had taken one swift look back, called out something that the rain had drowned, and gone on.

A stone was in the road, unseen, mud-covered, and Tara trod on it, and new pain shot up her left leg immediately so that she cried out. Jago slowed, turned, saw the icy whiteness of her face and said: 'What is it? We're nearly there—just a few yards more.'

'Then go on—I c-can't -' Tara tried to pull her hand free. Let him *go,* if he didn't like to get wet. Lalla was already nearly there, leaving them to manage together.

'Don't be an idiot.' And then, without slackening his hold, he exchanged hands, so that his left one was free to go behind her back, round her waist, holding her, supporting her...

'I said let me go!' The pain made her voice ragged, and the tears that had come with it mingled with the heavy raindrops.

But he didn't. That sharp spear of agony moved up the centre of her leg, and it gave way beneath her. And Tara felt herself going down—would have fallen—but then was lifted and held in a pair of strong hard arms. And now he had to slow his flight and walk, and she turned in her ceaseless struggle to be free, saw his face, and cried: 'Why?'

'You little fool! Did you think I'd leave you *there* in the middle of the road ?'

'Yes,' she panted. He pushed open the gate with an impatient, wellingtoned foot, and they saw the wide open porch door, but Lalla had vanished.

'Thanks,' his tone was dry, but Tara didn't care. 'You deserve to be dropped, *right now*, in the nearest puddle.' And he laughed. Tara hated him, and she didn't know why, except perhaps that he made her feel so weak and helpless that it was unnerving.

The porch was wide and dark and full of old mackintoshes and Wellingtons and brooms. He put her down and wiped his hand across his wet face. As Tara involuntarily backed, he said softly : 'Don't worry—I'm not going to kiss you again. Once was enough.'

'Oh!' she turned away—but couldn't walk. She had to *stand* there, as if impaled to the cold damp floor. She saw his movement and said: 'Leave me— please.'

'What is it? Your leg? Give me your arm- -' he began.

'I don't need—I don't need- -' she shook her head helplessly, and now the tears of pain ran freely down her cheeks, no longer hidden by rain.

'Help? I think you do,' he said quietly. 'But you have a remarkably stubborn streak for one so young.'

Lalla would be out in a moment. She *must* come. Tara bent to rub her knee, and heard the door open. She thought it was Lalla to call them in. Instead Jago had gone. Then, miraculously, the locked muscles were free, and she went slowly in, relief making her face glow.

Jago stood in the passage doorway, and was calling something to an invisible Lalla, for Tara heard her murmured reply. He stopped abruptly at Tara's entrance, turned to face her, and nodded.

'I see you made it at last,' he remarked. 'Good.' Then he turned again. 'Look, I won't stay for a cup of -'

'Yes, you will!' was the other's faint but indignant answer. 'Good gracious, of course. You can have lunch if you like.'

Tara waited and listened to them. And she watched Jago, wondering if it was her imagination. No, it wasn't, she decided suddenly, seeing him, seeing the darkly amused expression on his face. Just then, when he turned to her, it was as though he had been laughing at something. *Laughing* at her—he found the fact that she had been unable to move extremely amusing. His next actions confirmed it! He came back into the living room, unzipped his anorak and hung it neatly by the door on one of the pegs. He looked at Tara's sodden mac as she struggled out of it, then at her face, and grinned just before he turned away to go back to the kitchen. There had been nothing nice about the grin, it had expressed his thoughts quite clearly—don't expect an offer of help from me—Tara gritted her teeth and managed to pull the arm from her sleeve. Damn his arrogance! She would show him. She *would!*

But that was easier said than done. He stayed— of course. Tara had known he would, and he was pleasant and charming, and yet . . . and yet there was that indefinable something in his manner when he spoke to. Tara, something she couldn't place or explain, a quality almost of cool secret amusement that made, her uneasy. Whether Lalla noticed or not, she said nothing, but it seemed to Tara that she occasionally looked at him oddly as if wondering what there was different about him...

It put Tara on her mettle. She exerted herself to appear completely confident, managing—*almost*— to forget that silver thread-like scar that had helped to change her life.

After lunch was over Lalla pushed her chair away from the table, surveying the remains of the roast chicken and a few lonely potatoes. 'Ugh! Washing up should be abolished,' she said. 'We'll do it later——' this as Jago stood and began to stack plates. 'No, Jago, leave

them. Come and sit by the fire and tell us what you're doing here again so soon. Not—' she added hastily, as she eased herself into the comfortable armchair beside the roaring fire, 'that I'm complaining. I'm delighted, of course. But I didn't expect you for several weeks at the very least.'

He sat down on the settee, and after a moment's hesitation, Tara followed. It was either that or remain at the table, and *that*, she imagined, would delight him. It meant she was between him and Lalla, and she wondered fleetingly if he had done it deliberately, placed himself so that she had to sit there on his left, and he had to look across her at her aunt. She could feel his nearness quite strongly. The settee was technically a three-seater, but he sat nearer the centre than the end, and was only inches away ... He made her feel small, and she moved uncomfortably as he answered Lalla in his deep pleasant voice. He was a softly spoken man, but it carried, as if he were used to talking, and being listened to. He wore a different sweater, a thinner dark grey one with white shirt underneath, and his long legs were stretched out indolently, almost as if he were used to being there. He had taken off his wellingtons and left them in the porch, and there was a very small hole in the toe of one of his socks. Tara smiled inwardly at this evidence of imperfection. His voice intruded into this pleasant reverie as she heard him saying: 'I might not be able to be here so long this time, but I needed to get away.'

And then, because he had annoyed her so much that she couldn't resist, Tara asked: 'From what?' And she looked at him as she spoke, and smiled quite nicely, to let him see that the question was an innocent one.

Those brown eyes turned to her, and met hers in sudden challenge. 'From my work,' he answered.

'Yes, but what is it?' she persisted.

He shrugged. 'A lot of things. You could call me a—' he seemed to hesitate, but it was so momentary that it might have been her imagination, '—a teacher'.

'Oh' It wasn't what she had expected. Nor Lalla, for she broke in:

'Jago, how interesting. Why didn't you tell me before?'

He grinned at her aunt, and Tara noticed his teeth. They were strong and white, and one had a very small chip out...

'It's something I like to forget about when I'm here. Not because I don't enjoy my work, but because I'm under such intense pressure that I can only relax when I put it out of my mind.' And he turned a smile on Tara—and quite suddenly she knew he was lying. It might have been something in his eyes, a sudden darkening of that sherry brown. And they dared her to ask any more. Tara did not accept the challenge. She couldn't. Jago was too near, much too near, for comfort. She looked to wards her aunt to be rescued—and Lalla rose to the occasion, quite literally. She stood up. 'You know, I quite forgot about the coffee,' she said. 'I'll go and make it now.' And she walked out, leaving Tara wishing, quite absurdly, that she were anywhere else but *here.*

Jago said softly: 'Set your mind at rest, did I ?'

'I—what do you mean?' She had to turn to answer him, but it wasn't easy.

'That I'm not a convict on the run.'

She tried a casual laugh. It didn't quite succeed.

'Heavens! How silly! As if I would think -' and she faltered, for his eyes really were quite fascinating. Such long lashes—not too long, of course, but thick as well, and the whites of his eyes were very clear,

and she could see tiny flecks of black in that brown of the irises. She swallowed hard. For a moment she had felt as if—as if he were about to hypnotise her. Pulling together her scattered wits, she managed to look away, saw his feet, and blurted out inconsequently: 'You've got a hole in your sock!'

They might have been talking about footwear for hours, so little surprise did he show. He wriggled the offending foot. 'Yes, I know. When they get too bad I throw them away.'

'That's wasteful.'

'Isn't it just? But it's my one extravagance. What's yours?'

Tara stiffened and moved away a few inches, the limit of her freedom. Just *who* did he think he was anyway? He was insufferable—impertinent—and quite-' without any kind of finesse at all. She had never met anyone like him. She clasped her hands— and he looked at them and said: 'Why don't you relax? Or don't you like being asked personal questions?' And without waiting for her answer, he went on: 'Because if you don't, you should try and remember not to ask them.' And now he was openly laughing at her.

'Oh! You—you -' Tara turned on him angrily, temper rising fast. 'I could—c-could -'

'Hit me?' His mouth quirked. 'You already did. Once.' And he smiled slowly. 'But I really wouldn't advise you to try it again. You'll just have to learn to control your temper.'

'I don't need *lecturing* by you, even if you *are* a teacher.' And she said it in a way that implied her grave doubts. 'And I had a right—you shouldn't have kissed me!'

'True.' He shook his head slowly. 'It was a sudden impulse.' His voice dropped into a cockney whine. 'I .just don't know what came over me.' He had the accent dead right, as he had with the Americans, but Tara was in no mood to be amused.

She said sharply: 'You ought to get *your* impulses under control if that's where they lead you. Men who go round kissing strange women can get themselves into a lot of trouble. And you should know that, *if* you're a teacher.'

Jago scratched his ear thoughtfully. 'Do I detect a certain tone of disbelief in your voice? Are you trying to tell me something?'

Now was the moment when she should tread carefully. But Tara was too mad to care. 'Yes. I don't think you're a teacher at all!' There, it was said, and she felt almost lightheaded. But she didn't like the look on his face. A hard, shrewd penetrating glance that seemed to bore into her as he asked quietly: 'Then what do you think I am?'

'I don't know. I just think you're not prepared to tell anyone, for reasons of your own.'

'But you asked. *You* wanted to know.'

'It—it was just for something to say.' But she faltered. Damn the man! He smiled a crooked smile.

'No,' he said softly. T don't think it was. You thought it would get me mad if you asked. Why? Had your aunt told you I wouldn't talk about my work?'

And where was Lalla? Coffee didn't take this long, surely? Tara made as if to get up, but it took her several moments, her leg being as it was, and she was pulled down, not gently—not roughly either, but

quite firmly as Jago, with one hand still at her waist, said: 'Now, let's not run away. I just asked you something.'

'I was going to see about the -'

'Coffee? Yes, I'm sure,' he finished for her. 'But I'm also sure Lalla can manage admirably without you, and why should you want to get me mad?'

'Because—because you're an arrogant beast!' she burst out, and pushed his hand away from her waist. Such a strong hand, long-fingered, firm—and impudent as the rest of him. 'And keep your hands off me!

'You didn't say that when you nearly fell in the water at Kirkgarron,' he commented.

'I wouldn't have nearly fallen in if you hadn't *loomed* up out of the darkness like some Jack the Ripper,' she shot back. It was most odd really—but their exchange was having an effect on her that was almost exhilarating. Her cheeks tingled with warmth, the fire lit by that inscrutable glow in his brown eyes—and she felt alive, vibrant—something that had not happened for too many long months. She would not, she positively would not let him have the last word—and did he never lose his air of cool amusement? It would, reflected Tara, be almost interesting to see—almost. For she didn't really rare, not at all.

He began to laugh, genuinely delighted. 'That's quite descriptive—Jack the Ripper. I must remember that. I thought it was your leg that let you down. What have you done to it?'

Shocked, she met his eyes. 'W-why d-do -' she was stammering helplessly, stunned at his bluntness. But he wasn't finished.

'You've been in an accident, haven't you? Is that why you're always trying to hide the scar?'

With, a wordless cry of anguish, Tara tried to struggle to her feet, but he held her again, and said quickly: 'Tell me. Talk about it. It will help.'

Eyes blazing, she turned on him. 'It won't. You know nothing. Don't tell me -' her breast heaved with emotion, she felt as if she had gone white, drained of all colour with the shock of his crude, violent, *unforgivable* words. But he had not finished. Not even now, seeing her, knowing the effect of what he said. In a low urgent voice he went on: 'I *am* telling you now. You've allowed yourself to sink into a condition of self-pity because of what you think are outstanding deformities. But they're *not.* That scar's nearly invisible—you could cover it with special make-up and I guarantee not even your closest friend would be able to tell. And your leg -'

'Stop it. Stop it!' she breathed, and her hands went up to fight him away—but he anticipated her move, and two steel bands closed round her wrists as they reached his face. Desperately she struggled to free herself—but she was no match for him. Even if she had been fully well, she would have been as weak as a kitten compared to that hard muscular strength. But she had to try.

'Don't, please don't, Tara,' he said, and he wasn't laughing any more.

'Let me go!'

'If you promise not to hit me.' Those brown eyes gleamed.

'No, I won't—I *hate* you!'

The struggle was very one-sided. And with him, it was almost as if—Tara couldn't even put it into words, but it was as if he were a

spectator, watching what was going on. There was something terribly impersonal about him as he effortlessly held her, not only with those steely fingers, but with his eyes— those eyes—such a colour—so...

Tara realized that she was no longer struggling. Quite suddenly she was still. Her breathing was shallow and ragged, and gently, very gently, he eased her hands down so that they rested in her lap. And then he released her.

'All right?'

'No. You're awful,' she whispered. But the fire had gone, she didn't know why.

A distant clatter of cups broke the spell. The door opened and Lalla came in with a tray. Jago stood and went over to take the tray from her, and the waters closed over that small but significant incident, and the ripples vanished as Lalla proceeded With the age-old ritual of dispensing coffee. Tara watched Jago as he knelt on the fireside rug, holding a cup steady. His profile was sharply etched against the background of glowing coals. And Tara wondered at her temerity. But she could not, would not, let him speak to her as he had. *Who* did he think he was? She no longer knew. She was getting more puzzled—and frightened—every time she saw him. Some deeply feminine instinct warned her that he was a man of great power. And she didn't like him, wanted as little as possible to do with him —and that, she knew, was a vain hope, for Lalla liked him, and he was her welcome guest, whenever he chose to come. Suddenly Tara had a tingle of anticipation. What would he be like, this character in the book, based on Jago? She knew that it would be interesting to see—very interesting. And the thought was puzzling to her, and vaguely disturbing.

CHAPTER THREE

THE next couple of days were spent settling in. On the Tuesday morning Morag was due to come, but before she arrived Lalla and Tara spent an hour preparing the other sitting room at the front of the house, for Tara to begin her typing in.

They moved a table over to the window, and Lalla brought her typewriter down from her own study. 'There,' she said. 'I won't be needing that for a while—and I'll have more *room to* write this new book—I tend to spread myself a bit when I'm doing the first draft of a novel, you know.' Tara smiled, remembering the shock her first ever sight of Lalla's study had been, years before, when she had just begun a new Damien Corbett adventure. Pens, pencils, rubbers, and sheets of paper had been spread out in apparent disorder, but Lalla, oddly enough, knew where everything was.

'Can I just get everything straight?' Tara asked her now. 'I type a fair copy of this'—she tapped the bulging loose-leaf folder on the table—'and you want two carbons doing. What if I have any queries?'

'Mmm, yes. I mustn't be disturbed, dear. I suggest you have a quick look through before I go and start the morning's work; You should have a good idea from that whether it'll be straightforward— and don't forget, Tara love, I'm not expecting you to *race* through, you know. If you type ten pages today, I'll be amply satisfied.'

'I'll start now.' Tara sat down and opened the book carefully. Half a dozen sheets fluttered to the carpet, and she looked up. They both burst out laughing together.

'Oh dear,' Lalla admitted, 'I'm afraid I couldn't get them all in. Still, I'm sure -' her voice tailed away.

'I'll manage. Of course I will.' Tara smiled. 'I can't *wait* really—honestly. Go on. I'll skim through the first twenty pages or so, and let you know any .problems before you're too engrossed in your other epic.'

'And I'll make coffee 1' Lalla clapped her hands as if she had just had a brilliant idea, then went out. For a moment Tara gazed in front of her, unseeing. The memories of Sunday came back to haunt her with her aunt's departure. She wondered, not for the first time, if Lalla had known that she and Jago were arguing, and had deliberately kept out of the way. It seemed likely. She had been gone a long time, and there had been an odd expression in her eyes when at last she had returned. Tara bit her lip and bent to the sprawling handwriting that spread itself across the pages. What did it matter? He had kept out of the way since Sunday—at least he had some decency, she thought wryly. Tara had seen nothing of him, except once. The previous night when she had gone to her window to open it, she had seen him come striding down from the hill, a dark, swiftly moving shape nimbly moving over stones and clumps of sleeping heather as if he knew every inch of the way—and maybe he did. And Tara had watched, careful not to be seen, but reluctant to look away. He could have been coming from the direction of the Big House—and that was odd, for what was there for him? Short of asking him, she would never know, and she had no intention of doing *that.* She smiled reluctantly to herself and began to read the manuscript at last.

Morag arrived before Lalla went upstairs to begin her new book. Tara heard voices from the other room as she read the first pages of the manuscript, and it seemed that something was amiss. Something in Lalla's voice gave that impression, and Tara put the bulky papers down and listened. A minute later Lalla came in, closing the door quietly behind her. She gave Tara a little smile. 'Slight hitch,' she whispered. 'Morag's had to bring her granddaughter with her, Fiona. Her daughter-in-law, the girl's mother, is ill or something—and I—

we wondered if you could possibly keep an eye on her while Morag does upstairs.' And as Tara stood up and said:

'Of course I will—I can read in there -' Lalla added:

'She's not quite normal—I mean, you really have to *watch* her—she's a beautiful little girl—a terrible tragedy, but—well, you'll see what I mean.

Come and meet them.'

Curious, not a little disturbed, Tara followed her out of the quiet warm room and into the other. A thin wiry woman with grey hair stood there holding the hand of a girl about seven. A small girl with bright blue eyes and beautiful features, sadly marred by an expression of blank defiance—and something else.

The woman spoke. 'Mr Black said you had a visitor when I was there just,' she smiled at Tara shyly, showing strong yellowy teeth, and Tara went forward to shake her hand.

Morag went on to Lalla: 'I am sorry indeed to have to bring Fiona today, miss—but my son's wife .is ill with the one she is expecting, and cannot do with her.' She turned to Tara. 'She is not all here, you see, miss, and flies into terrible tempers. It is the Lord's will, we know, but it is more than her mother can manage at a time like this -'

Tara heard the words, but they scarcely registered, so shocked was she at the way Morag spoke— almost as if the girl *were not there.* But Fiona showed no response. No flicker showed in her eyes, which were fixed somewhere along the carpet. She stood passive, listless, and Tara's heart went out to her with a surge of some emotion she knew she would never be able to put into words. She forced a cheerful smile. 'I'll look after her, of course, Mrs -?'

'McWhirter—but I would be obliged to be called Morag, for no one here on Gaela calls me by the other.'

'All right, Morag. Thank you.'

Lalla appeared greatly relieved. 'There now, if you can do the bedrooms first, Morag. Tara, bring the papers in. You might be able to skim through while you and Fiona are in here -' She turned and went out towards the stairs with Morag in tow, and Tara was left with Fiona. She looked at the girl. She hadn't moved, just remained standing where her grandmother had left her. But her eyes flickered upwards as Tara moved away to bring back the manuscript. Tara caught the look arid faltered in her step. What had been there? Suffering—but surely not? She closed her eyes for a second, went quickly out and came back with the papers, which she put on the table. Then she went over to the girl and gently held out her hand to touch the other's arm.

'Would you like to sit down, Fiona?' she said slowly and clearly.

Fiona's arm was thin under the woolly blue jumper she wore, and she flinched at Tara's touch. Then, very slowly, she looked up, and Tara had the full force of that painful expression. She drew in breath sharply at the sudden anger she saw there.—and for a second felt sorrow. She had never met a child like this before, and mingling with the instinctive sympathy was a feeling of utter helplessness.

She did not know what was so soon to happen— could not foresee the shock to come—which in a strange way would be instrumental in changing both her and Fiona's entire lives. All Tara knew was what she saw there in that bright, warm, *normal* living room, herself and a little girl who could not speak, and who appeared to have a smouldering temper.

Faintly from upstairs came the whirr of a vacuum cleaner, and it somehow intensified the atmosphere in that room. Tara went to the table and picked up the manuscript. She looked at Fiona, who now watched her, and smiled. 'I'm going to sit down,' she said. 'Why don't you? See—on the settee beside me.' And she went without waiting to see the girl's reaction. With studied carelessness Tara opened the book and began to read. But it was difficult to concentrate, and the words didn't make sense. She persevered. Perhaps it was the best thing to ignore her—but Tara knew, even as she thought it, that she couldn't. With a sigh she patted the cushion beside her, said: 'Come on, Fiona, it's warmer here,' and at the same moment there was a sharp rat-tat on the outer door—and Jago walked in.

What happened next had a dreamlike quality, and afterwards Tara tried to remember the exact sequence of events. Certain incidents in life are, in a way, timeless. You can suddenly think about them—perhaps years afterwards—and it is as though they have just happened, because they have an immediacy that can dispel the time barrier. Thus it would be for Tara—although she was not to know it then—with what happened next. And she would always feel again, whenever she thought about what happened, the same sense of horrified amazement— and the urge to cry out, to stop it.,.

Jago came in, looked at Tara, and then at Fiona, and said without preamble: 'I know you've got work to do. I'll mind Fiona at my house if you like.'

'Oh, but I don't think——' strangely surprised, she began to get to her feet, and saw Fiona's hands go up to her face as the girl began to cry softly in a horrible, strangled way. Tara looked quickly at Jago—and he was watching the girl with that same expression she had noticed before, that standing back—almost *abstract* look that was so frightening. Quickly she said: 'Can't we do- -' and he interrupted her.

'No. Leave her to me. Don't you do any -' and then Fiona turned round, and before either of them could even begin to guess what was in her mind, reached out and swept several of the small glass ornaments from the mantelpiece. They shattered in the stone hearth and lay there twinkling in the light. And Fiona looked up with an expression of satisfaction on her face.

Before Tara could move, Jago strode forward, picked the girl up, and *shook* her hard.

With a wordless shocked exclamation, Tara began to move forward to stop him, but Jago, without turning round, said: 'Leave it. Stay *there.'* She froze in her tracks. There had been that in his voice that she could not, *dared* not disobey—but she didn't know why. And she watched in horrified fascination as Jago put Fiona down and knelt in front of her; holding the thin arms tightly as he began to speak. The little girl's face had gone white with shock— and Tara, freed from the fear that held her, moved—then heard those words that were so strangely familiar, and stopped again.

Jago spoke loudly and clearly, and each word was emphatic.

'Fiona, I can help you. *I can help you.'* He touched his chest with his hand, then the girl's— very gently, and Tara could only see his profile, for she was nearly beside them now, and she watched it fascinated, for there was *something*—some intensity that was communicating itself to the girl who now • 'stood very still—as if listening—or trying to. A strange sensation began to fill Tara too, and she could not have moved if she had wanted to: Not now, not until he had finished.

Her eyes moved to Fiona, saw her face lose something of the pinched sullen look as she—very slowly—nodded. Jago stood up, still holding her, and turned to face Tara. She noticed, quite

inconsequentially, that perspiration ran down his forehead, as if it were very hot, or as if he had been running.

'I'm glad you didn't interrupt,' he said. 'I had to know something, and now I think I do. I want you to help me. Will you ?'

Tara nodded. 'Yes.'

'Good. Then listen carefully. I met Fiona for the first time about an hour ago. Morag says she's simple—a "daftie" was her way of putting it—but I don't agree. I saw a glimmer of something—I think she's suffering from deafness—and I'm going to try and prove it. Is there a bell here—or something that will make a loud noise?'

Tara thought rapidly. 'No, not a bell. I can't think of anything -' she stopped, not knowing, not *guessing*.

'Then will you do something?' He was carefully not looking at Fiona as he spoke, but continuing to hold her, not tightly, gently.

'Yes. Anything.' She didn't know why she said that.

'I want you, in a few minutes, when I give you a signal, to go behind Fiona and clap your hands as loudly as possible. Twice. That's all. First though, will you bring her in a drink from the kitchen? Anything will do, water, milk, orange juice.'

'Yes.' And she went straight out. She was too dazed by what had happened to think straight, let alone argue.

When she came back with a beaker half full of milk, they had moved. Jago was sitting on the settee with Fiona standing in front of him. He took the cup from Tara, and handed it to the girl. 'Drink that,' he said, and smiled. She took it obediently and began to drink, and he said very quietly, his face turned so that Fiona couldn't see his lips: 'Now, Tara.'

She went behind Fiona, and holding her hands close to the child's head, clapped them loudly together twice. The report echoed round the room like gunshot, but Fiona never faltered, never even budged. Jago stood up. He looked at Tara. 'Well?' he said.

She swallowed. 'I think—it's possible. But it doesn't -'

'It doesn't prove anything—-or even if that's all that's wrong with her—but it could be. I'm going to see Morag. Where is she ?'

'Upstairs doing the bedrooms. Shall I go -?'

'No, stay here with Fiona. It'll be better.' He went out quietly and shut the door behind him. Tara, her legs suddenly very weak, sat down. The atmosphere was completely different in the room now. Something, some strange quality brought by the girl, had gone—and with sudden recognition Tara realized what it had been—fear. Fiona had been frightened before—yet she was no longer. She sat down in Lalla's easy chair, finished her milk and put the empty beaker in the hearth. One of the broken slivers of glass was dislodged by the movement and Tara looked quickly across. Her eyes met Fiona's—and she was astonished to see the girl's eyes fill with tears. She slowly bent and picked up the shattered fragment and Tara moved quickly, fearful lest the little girl should cut herself.

She knelt by the other's side and gently reached out for the piece of glass, transparent, green-flecked, the head and front legs of a horse.

"That's all right, Fiona, it's all right,' Tara reassured her. She turned and swept all the pieces together with the hearthbrush, then looked round for something to put the pieces in. She didn't want to go out to the kitchen for a bag in case Fiona hurt herself.

The door to the hall opened, and she looked quickly round. *Jago came* in. His face gave nothing away, but Fiona stood up quickly,

nervously—as if she *knew* where he had been. Perhaps she did. Tara's mind was one whirling mass of confusion, and she put her hand to her forehead. Had it all really happened? She too stood up and asked:

'Well?'

'Nothing—yet. I can't talk now. Fiona,' he went over to the girl who stood by the fireplace, quite still—and waiting. He tilted Fiona's face up, and she didn't resist. She trusts him, thought Tara in wonder. She met him only hours ago, yet she *trusts* him. Tara was strangely disturbed by the knowledge, and her heart beat faster as she remembered her own instinctive dislike of him, that even now was as strong—even after what had happened.

She suddenly didn't want to stay in the room and see what happened next—and she didn't know why, except that she needed to get away. 'I-I'll make coffee,' she blurted out, and fled to the kitchen. Safely there, she leaned against the cupboard and tried to collect her scattered thoughts. Everything had been so quick, from Fiona's first arriving, to this. Shaking her head, as if that might clear it, Tara went over to the .sink to fill the kettle. Even if Jago didn't need a drink, she did.

When she went back again with the tray of coffee, | and a paper bag for the fragments of glass, Jago and Fiona were sitting on the settee both looking at the sketch pad he had on his knee. Tara put the tray down quietly on the table, curious to know what they were doing, yet loath to disturb them. She quickly swept the shiny broken pieces into the bag and carried it out again to the kitchen. When she went back, she poured out two cups of coffee, and leaving his on the tray, carried her own to the chair where she sat down. She could see clearly now that he was sketching something, and that Fiona was watching intently, all her concentration on Jago and his swiftly, moving fingers. Impelled by a force stronger than she knew, she stood up and gently crossed behind the settee. She saw the sketch pad, saw the

drawings on the white paper, and slowly took in her breath. There, small but clear, drawn with swift bold lines, were pictures of animals and trees and people. Tara stood motionless, not knowing what he would do next—wanting very much to know, yet with a strangely disturbing sensation inside her. Perhaps she had imagined that he would try and teach her to say words—but she was wrong. With a swift movement he stripped the piece of paper from the pad, put the sketch block on Fiona's lap and pressed the pen into her hand. He put his own hand on the girl's cheek and turned her to face him. Tara saw again a certain intensity in his eyes that made her tremble. But Fiona caught and held that glance hungrily as if she *needed* it.

'Copy these pictures, Fiona,' he told her, speaking as he always did with the girl, slowly and clearly. As if to further demonstrate his meaning, he took her fingers on the pen and began to guide them over the paper. And suddenly—Fiona nodded. Tara found that she had been holding her breath only when she at last released it. She watched the two hands, the girl's thin and frail, covered by the firm strong fingers of the man beside her. And Tara could not move or speak, not even to save her life.

Tara was only able to tell Lalla about everything that had happened much later in the day, when work was over, and both were sitting by the fire drinking coffee. Lalla was a good listener—more so, Tara suspected, because it concerned Jago, and she was hungrily lapping up facts to help her with her character in the book. She was at the part where Fiona had tentatively begun to copy the simple animals drawn by Jago when Lalla burst out: 'It's incredible! I wouldn't have *believed!* What patience that man must have!'

Tara nodded, reluctant, for reasons she couldn't fathom, to admit anything good of him, but nevertheless affected in a way she didn't begin to understand. 'I know. He—doesn't look like a man who'd

bother—but, Lalla, he did. And she drew those pictures, copied every one—and they were quite good. He—he put her pictures in his pocket after, and gave her the ones he'd done to keep.'

'Mm, interesting.' Lalla looked suddenly thoughtful. 'I wonder -'

'What?'

'Oh, nothing,' she shrugged. 'Then what?'

Tara clasped hands over her knees and cast her mind back, seeing everything as clearly as if it had just happened. 'Well, then he seemed to—to lose interest. It's difficult to explain what I mean—but it was as though he'd done something he set out to do, and it was over.' She gave a little shudder. 'Oh, Lalla, I can't explain it, but there's something awfully cold-blooded about him at times. He's like a— a scientist in a laboratory doing—experiments -'

Lalla burst out laughing. 'What an imagination! You should be a writer.'

Tara bit her lip, then smiled reluctantly. 'Yes, I know it sounds silly—but I was there. He sort of switched off. He drank his coffee, said goodbye to Fiona, and went. She changed after he'd gone too—went back to what she'd been before. It's almost frightening. He—he's like a hypnotist!' She shivered. And this time Lalla didn't laugh. She gave Tara a strange look and nodded slowly.

'Yes, I think—I think I know what you mean. Did he tell you what Morag had said ?'

'No. I didn't ask again, after he'd come down. He didn't look very pleased—oh, Lalla, do you know something? He frightens me.'

The older woman patted Tara's knee. 'My dear, he does me at times. He's a very complex character, our Jago, a very deep person—and

you know something? For all that calm exterior I can sense smouldering fires inside—yes, I know I've got a vivid imagination, I wouldn't be writing if I hadn't—but there's something, some one thing I can't explain— but I'll bet he's got the very devil of a temper if the right thing triggers it off. I'll tell you something— I'd like to be a safe distance if he loses it any time.'

Tara was silent—and thoughtful. Deep inside her she knew the truth of the other's words, and at the same time she saw again with her inner eye the picture made when Jago had knelt in front of Fiona and told her he could help her. The scene was unforgettable, deeply etched in her memory—and in a way, very moving. Tara stirred uneasily. What was he, this Jago? Would she ever know—and why did she *want* to know? But they were questions she dared *not even* ask herself, let alone another person.

Gradually, as the days passed, Tara began to feel more at home, less tense and tight. The weather was bad, rain and icy sleet making the road outside a quagmire, and Morag was unable to turn up, so that Tara and Lalla had to look after the house themselves. But it didn't matter. Tara was easier in her mind than she had been for months—since before the accident. Even the intense hurt of rejection by David was beginning to fade, and sometimes, When Tara thought about him, she had difficulty remembering exactly what he looked like. She would never have believed it possible if anyone had told her, but it had happened.

His image blurred and slipped, and the once intolerable ache lessened with each day that passed.

Occasionally, and much to her own surprise, Tara found herself thinking of their next-door neighbour, Jago, and there was no difficulty seeing that mocking, amused face. He had kept out of the

way too, as if knowing that Tara didn't like him. But then, one day, exactly a week after his last disturbing visit, he arrived, quite unexpectedly. It was mid- morning, Lalla was busy writing upstairs, and Tara was deep in typing. A thin fine mist was dispersing slowly, and Tara got up from typing a particularly complicated chapter to flex her fingers and stand by the window for a moment to stretch her aching back. And she saw Jago coming up the path towards the house. He looked up at that moment and their eyes met. He looked cold and wet, and Tara's heart skipped a beat, most oddly. He held up a bundle wrapped in newspaper and pointed towards her front door. Tara's lips tightened—but she had no choice. For some reason he wanted to come in. Her hand went instinctively to her face. She had almost managed to forget about the scar—at least she didn't think about it so much. But seeing him brought back the self-consciousness, and even as she went to open the door, she wondered why it should be so. Why did this stranger, this awkward, smiling man, manage to make her feel clumsy and embarrassed? She *didn't* like it one bit.

'Hello,' he greeted her, and he had every intention of coming in, that was clear. So much so that Tara had to move back quickly, or she felt as if she might possibly have been trampled on!

'Do come in,' she said. The sarcasm wasn't lost on him. He grinned quickly, disarmingly.

'Thanks.' For a moment he stood there, just looking at her, and Tara wanted to move away. Instinct fought with reason—and she managed to stand her ground. He was so disconcertingly tall and broad-shouldered. She had noticed before, of course, but somehow, now, with just the two of them, it was more obvious. The fact that she wore flat-heeled slippers didn't help either, and it was with great annoyance that she looked up at him and said, in a voice that was a little distant: 'I'm afraid my aunt's working. If I can give her a message for later -' and she raised an enquiring eyebrow.

'I know she's working. It's you I've come to see.' He held out the small newspaper-covered packet, and Tara took it, feeling the warmth of it still from his hand. 'Letters,' he explained. 'It won't bite. And the paper's there to cover them from the rain.'

Tara felt the flush creep slowly upwards from her neck. 'Oh, I see,' she said faintly. She swallowed hard, knowing how ungracious she must sound. 'Thank you. Will you—er—sit down for a moment?'

'How nice of you to ask.' He had automatically taken off his muddy wellingtons in the porch, and now with deft easy movements he peeled off the soaking anorak and hung it up. And Tara watched him, wondering, not for the first time, why he could manage to make her feel small and—*helpless*—in just a few gentle words. What a terrible man! He really was. But he had taken the trouble to bring some letters—quite a few judging by the feel of the bundle, and the least, the very least she could do would be to offer him a drink. 'Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?' she asked as he sat down by the roaring fire and began to rub his hands. He looked round and gave a mock shudder.

'Coffee, please. It's freezing out.' Funny, his hair was all wet and glistening in the light from the fire. Dark and shiny, black—blacker than night, and straight—and Tara's heart skipped a crazy beat. His eyebrows met in the middle—and she remembered Lalla's words about him probably having a fiery temper. Well, that was supposed to be a sure sign, wasn't it?

'Where is it?'

She gave a little jump. 'What?'

'The smut. Is it on my nose ?'

'Oh!' she turned away abruptly. How dare he! 'I was just t-trying to remember if you had sugar,' she lied quickly.

'Ah, yes,' but he didn't believe her. 'None, thanks.' And he smiled before turning away.

Tara went out to the kitchen and made coffee. When she returned he was leaning back in the chair with his eyes closed as if tired,

'Here you are. No sugar.' After handing it to him she looked, not too ostentatiously, but not discreetly either, at her watch. 'Gracious, nearly twelve. The time does go quickly when you're working, doesn't it?'

'It's all right, I'm going after I've drunk this. I want to ask you a favour first.'

'W-what is it?'

'I've been to see Fiona's parents—Morag's son and daughter-in-law.'

'About Fiona?' She leaned forward in her chair. 'What did they say?'

'About my theory of her being deaf? Exactly what I thought. They don't think much of it—in fact I'll lay odds that they think I'm a big daft Sassenach.'

'Oh!' There wasn't much Tara could say to that, and she didn't try. A slight smile touched Jago's mouth, as if he guessed.

'But because they're possibly sorry for me—and think I should be humoured—and also I suspect, because I employ Morag and pay her twice *as* much as I should, they agreed to let me talk to Fiona and try to help her when Morag brings her.'

'But—I don't see -' Tara began. She was puzzled.

'I want her at *my* house—I want to have her for an hour or two when Morag comes here to you. And I need a woman there with us. She's never been alone without a female relative of some sort around — which is fair enough—so I need a chaperone. You—if you will. Will you?'

Tara froze with shock. 'I don't -' she began.

He swallowed his coffee in one gulp and stood up. 'Don't say a word now. Think it over. I don't want you to do anything—just be there. It'll only be for a few hours a week, and I'll pay you.'

Anger flared briefly. 'I don't want *money,'* she cried, with scorn. 'It's not that. It's—are you sure— you can help?' And she faced him. 'What are you?' she cried. 'Tell me!'

Those brown hypnotic eyes met and challenged her own lighter ones, and she faltered under that deep steady gaze. 'I've told you already,' he said slowly. 'I'm a teacher.'

'No—no, you're not! I don't -' she hesitated, courage nearly deserting her in the face of that strength—'don't believe you.'

He smiled. But it wasn't his usual grin; there was a deadly quality to it, a cold, *frightening* quality that unnerved Tara and made her move uneasily. 'Tell me,' he said softly, 'what does a teacher look like? A bit stooping? Elderly—specs on end of nose -'

'No,' she cried. 'No, it's not *that.* It's just—I think you're something else—but I don't know what!' But he didn't look like somebody's idea of a teacher anyway. Perhaps a rugby coach—or athlete—but the thought of him sitting at a desk and lecturing fifth-formers on physics was something so alien as to verge on the ridiculous. And there was something else too, that had made her say what she had. She didn't understand it—but yet, inside, deeply buried, was the knowledge that

perhaps, when she discovered the truth about him, she would also know lots of other things that had puzzled and intrigued her about him ever since they had first met.

He nodded—and Tara was aware of that distant quality in him again. That impersonality that was so disconcerting to her. It made her want to *shake* him, and at the thought her fingers tingled, as if at her own temerity. The very idea of actually touching him was at once both shocking and exciting. Suddenly weak, Tara began to turn away. 'I'm—sorry -' she began hesitantly, 'I shouldn't have -'

She found herself being gripped quite firmly, and was forced to look at him.

'Yes, you have a right—in a way,' he said. 'Of course you have. Suppose I did more harm than good to Fiona? That's what you're thinking, isn't it?'

But Tara wasn't, couldn't be sure any more what she did mean. She shook her head faintly. 'I don't know,' she admitted. 'Let me go.'

'In a minute. I'll tell you something first. I'm not a bungling amateur. I promise you I can help Fiona. Not as much as I would like—yet, but I swear I will do her no harm. Does that set your mind at rest?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'Yes, it does. And I'll help.' She didn't intend to commit herself so soon, but something made her.

He released her abruptly, as if now, having heard the words he wanted, he had no further use for her. 'Right,' he said. 'I'll go and let you get back to your typing. The weather's improving rapidly. Morag should be able to come in a day or so. Now I *know*— I've got some things to get ready. I'll be seeing you.' He went to where his coat was hanging, and Tara remained where she was. She was shaking—not on the outside, but inwardly. This man had the power to frighten

her—not physically—but in a very primitive, emotional way. She didn't like or understand it, and she wished she had the courage to fight it, but she could not. She had never met anyone like Jago before, and now, very gradually, was coming to understand why Lalla found him so essential to the book she was writing. There *was* something fascinating about him. And more, much more—but what, she did not know.

Lalla was interested to hear of Jago's request. She looked shrewdly at Tara that evening as they both prepared supper in the kitchen.

'You know,' she remarked, as she busily grated hard Cheddar for the spaghetti bolognaise that Tara was watching in the pan, 'isn't it strange how things seem to work out? I mean, *you* arrive—then next thing Fiona comes—and he seems keen to help her —and you're here to help her too.'

'It is strange,' Tara agreed, and looked at her aunt. 'And *he's* strange too—oh, I don't mean mad; or anything like that. But, well -' she shrugged helplessly, 'he's so jolly impersonal sometimes, like a—computer.' She shook her head at Lalla's startled burst of laughter. 'No, I know it sounds ridiculous, but he is—and I don't know why. He frightens me!'

'Yet he wants to help a little girl that he thinks is deaf,' said Lalla gently. 'He can't be all that impersonal to want to do that. A lot of people wouldn't bother. They'd just accept Morag's definition of her as a "daftie", and feel sorry—and leave it at that. But he didn't -' and as she spoke, Tara remembered again the scene in the living room that day when Fiona had deliberately broken the ornaments, and Jago had picked her up and shaken her. There had, in those brief unforgettable moments, been nothing impersonal about him then—on the contrary, a crackling, vibrant energy had filled the room— a brief

irresistible strength of will that neither she nor the girl had been able to resist—and which had made her heart beat faster. No, it was only occasionally that she saw the remoteness, and wondered. Wondered, too, if she would ever know why. And there was nothing to tell her then, in that kitchen, that all too soon, she would discover the reason. Then nothing would ever be quite the same again.

The weather had improved vastly the next day, and Tara woke to see a clear pale sky with a sun trying to shine through watery clouds. She stretched and got out of bed, fingers itching to begin typing again. She was near a particularly interesting part of the Damien Corbett thriller, with the hero in an impossible situation, tied hand and foot in the cabin of a cruiser loaded with explosives that was making its swift way along the Thames towards the centre of London. It seemed impossible that he could survive. The only other occupant of the boat was a drugged White Russian countess, a beautiful spy who hated him so much that she might possibly kill him, her- self—if she woke in time—before the explosion, when the boat hit a bridge, as it would surely do.

Tara dressed quickly, wondering whether Morag would turn up. It would be interesting to see, and she found her heart beating faster at the thought of going next door and sitting watching Jago working with Fiona. What would he do? she wondered— arid was annoyed with herself for her curiosity. Of course she would love to see the girl improve. It would be nothing short of a miracle if Jago could prove that she was deaf, and not, as everyone supposed, mentally retarded. But could he? Who was he to think he could, *alone,* find out? Tara, as she washed her face, found her thoughts wandering back to that scene, that *dreadful* scene on the ferry from the mainland. Something about that was equally puzzling, when he had referred to her leg, and her scar, so blatantly—and hurtfully. Would he be as hard with Fiona? As Tara pulled on a warm Aran sweater, her mouth tightened

rebelliously. She would *not*, she positively would not just stand by and let him, if so. She would speak up and to hell with him! She fastened the belt on her grey trews, pulled the chunky sweater over her slim hips, and went downstairs for breakfast. It seemed to her, as she went into the living room, that Mr Jago Black was the kind of man who was used to getting his own way in everything. Well, the time had come for a change, and she, Tara Blaine, might provide some shocks for that confident man. Blissfully unaware of the shocks she herself was to receive before very long, Tara went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

At two o'clock, Tara had had Enough typing for one day. She pushed the last sheet of the most exciting chapter she had ever done in the wire tray and got up from her chair to go to the window. Her eyes, back, and fingers ached. Outside a cold breeze teased the bare trees, and a few puddles shivered in the muddy road. But the air was fresh, and the sun, admittedly weak, shone down bravely—so Tara decided to go for a walk. She needed some exercise, having been cooped up in the house for several days. She knew Lalla would still be busy upstairs, and would not have dreamed of disturbing her. As she went out to the kitchen, the idea took hold and strengthened, and the walk developed into a visit to the Big House—the ancestral home of the old laird —a place she intended to visit anyway, some time— and why not now? Tara looked round the kitchen. *And* why not take sandwiches and a flask? She would leave a note, and if she set off immediately, would be back well before dark, for it was a mere three miles away uphill, and the views from it would be breathtaking on such a clear day as this.

Tara almost laughed as she bent to the cupboard which held the flask. It was like playing truant—she felt young and almost happy as she put on the kettle for coffee and began to butter crispbread, the winter standby for when fresh bread was not available. She would wrap up

well, take an extra scarf to protect her face from the wind, and the walk would give her an appetite to enjoy coffee and food at the top of the hill. It would do her good. Her fingers ached so much to get on with the typing—yet she knew she must not, for she was tired enough to start making mistakes—and she would come back refreshed from the walk, and perhaps even continue in the evening, for the desire to *know* what happened to the luckless hero was overwhelming. She hesitated a moment as she put the crispbreads in a plastic bag. Should she take the rest of the manuscript with her? No, better to leave it completely alone for an hour or two. All the more stimulating and interesting to return to then.

Tara filled the flask, put both sandwiches and coffee in a shopping bag, then, as an afterthought, dropped in a women's magazine, a half empty packet of Lalla's cigarettes, and a box of matches. Tara smoked occasionally when she was working, rarely at other times, but felt as if she might enjoy a cigarette at the top of the hill. Something was bothering her at the back of her mind. She couldn't think clearly what it was, and sometimes a cigarette - helped ...

She wrote a note, put it in a prominent place on the living room table, and went into the porch. The wellingtons were cold and unwelcoming at first, but after a few minutes' walking, began to feel more comfortable. She had passed Jago's house, resolutely not staring at it, hoping that he wasn't looking but walking carefully, so that the limp was lessened, just in case ... It didn't matter—it didn't *have* to matter, but Tara felt it important that he should see it was really *nothing*, nothing at all, to her.

She struck upwards along the familiar track that was barely anything at all, just an occasional lessening of the thick grass and springy heather, and it all squelched underfoot anyway, track or no track, and the only guide was your eyes. As long as you knew what rocks and trees to look for, you would find your way. The air was salty, sea-laden, with that tangy freshness peculiar to the Western Isles, and

Tara found she was breathing deeply of it, as a thirsty child drinks fresh, water. Her leg ached only when she paused, so she kept on steadily, not looking back yet. Time for that when she reached the plateau and the whole panorama unrolled before her, and she would know again the ache in her heart that such beauty always brought. For beauty could be sad in a way, and she couldn't explain it, only knew that sometimes, seeing the grey craggy sweep of a mountain, or a gull etched against a pale sky, she wanted to weep.

But she had to stop after a while, to get her breath, and she turned, leaning slightly backwards for balance, and everything was far away. Two tiny roofs were visible, like children's toys, and the smoke curled out of two chimneys, straight up and up, and vanished for ever. So the wind had dropped, Tara realized, and that was a bit odd, but it didn't strike her then. She looked at them, the two dolls' houses set by a winding yellow ribbon of road leading to the village, with the sea just a stone's throw in front of them, dark and still and cruel, and she kept on looking for several minutes, and her thoughts were mixed. Then, breath regained, she began to walk upwards again.

The air was cold, and it stung colour into her cheeks, and made them tingle. The prospect of a cup of hot coffee and a cigarette was too wonderful to contemplate, so she didn't even think of them, but of other things—of the letter she had received from her mother, -in the bundle brought by Jago the previous day, giving her all the news, but carefully not .mentioning David—asking her how she was going on—and was Lalla all right to work for? Tara smiled a little to herself at the thought. If they did but know, the typing she was now doing was probably the best thing that could have happened to her. She must write back tomorrow, and Morag would take it, as she always did, when she left for home. It was Lalla's suspicion that Morag probably steamed the letters open before she took them to the post office, but Tara didn't mind. She wouldn't be writing anything personal—there was no one to write *private* letters to—and at that thought her breath caught in her throat and she had to cough.

The next minute the house came into view. And Tara stood still to look properly at it before she got too close. It was tragic to see it so neglected and forlorn-looking, a large building with its many windows miraculously intact, staring blankly and blindly out towards sea. A tall craggy stone-built house, the walls were strong enough to last another thousand years, but slates were missing from the roof, and moss grew in the gutters, and an occasional weed stuck out at an angle from a crack in the walls. The front door was large, and the paint, once a rich brown, was flat and dead with none of the former splendour remaining. And yet just for a few moments Tara had a vision in her mind's eye, and saw the house as it had been—and could be again— and the sensation, and that brief illusion, were disturbing.

She looked around her, trying to picture the gardens as they must have once been, rolling lawns and trees and shrubs—all the tough and hardy ones that would survive the bitter winds from the sea. But there would have been a certain elegance even so, and that, with the distant background of water and islands, would have been more than enough for anyone, living there. Tara sighed a little and moved on. The front door was unlocked—or had been the last time she was there, and there was no reason to suppose anyone would have been locked it since, for who was interested in the place now? The old laird had been dead nearly twenty years, and the house had been gradually dying ever since. Tara knew nothing of the story, only that there had been family feuds, and much unhappiness, and perhaps that too was preserved between the ancient solid walls, for she always experienced a slight feeling of sadness on seeing the place—as if things were regretted but were too late to be put right. It was eerie really, there was nothing frightening there, and Tara did not consider herself psychic, but it was as if, somehow, someone were trying to tell her something.

Shaking off the fancy, she went to the door and pushed. It creaked slowly open, and a stale musty smell came out to meet her, and in the

distance there was a quick light scutter of tiny feet. Tara paused, smiling slightly, to let her eyes adjust to the gloom. She had no fear of mice—they were in for a treat with her crumbs of food did they but know it. She had also seen several sheep on the hillside on her way up. If there was a back door open there would undoubtedly be several of them sheltering in comparative warmth from the bleak January weather.

The hall was vast, and the stairs led up to a huge square landing which must have once echoed to the sound of parties and laughing voices. Once-—but no more. There was nothing now save the mouldering carpet and the pictures lining the four walls of the landing. The portraits that had been bothering Tara ever since she had come to Gaela—but she didn't know why.

She looked at her watch. Nearly three, and there was nice time to look around before sitting down for the small picnic tea she had brought. And then, after a cigarette, it would be time to return home, and perhaps Lalla would still be busy with her writing and wouldn't even know Tara had been away. She was walking up the stairs as these thoughts crossed her mind, holding on to the banister, which creaked with age, and from the distance there came a faint sound that might have been a sigh— and Tara started momentarily, then went on. She had no fear of ghosts. She carried her own phantoms with her, far more painful ones; the scar, and the leg. Both reminders of that day when her dreams had crumbled into dust as fine as that which lay on the banister, and as intangible. Tara ran her fingers along the old wood. She was at the top now, looking along the picture-lined walls, and the fine dust stuck to her fingers, and she looked at the nearest portrait—and then she knew what had been nagging so surely and firmly at the back of her mind. The picture was of Jago Black.

CHAPTER FOUR

TARA stood quite still for several moments to absorb the shock. This had been in the back of her mind ever since she had first met Jago—but she had not consciously recognized him as the man in a picture—only known a small naming puzzlement soon swamped by everything else that had happened since. She went closer to look properly now, and particularly to read the faded brown letters on the golden label at the bottom of the frame. 'Angus Stuart Cameron, 1784-1863,' it said. Her eyes travelled slowly upwards to the face of the man, standing there resplendent in full dress tartan, one hand on a dog's, head. Those eyes, those hypnotic eyes, were the same—and almost as if looking at her with subtle mockery, even from over a hundred years ago. This man's nose was straighter, but the mouth, that mouth that had—Tara's hand went instinctively to her own lips at the memory of that unfortunate kiss—that was the same, well shaped, sensual, full lower lip jutting slightly, as did Jago's.

She took a deep breath and shook her head slightly. She knew that people had doubles, but this was too much of a coincidence. The painter had caught an expression so fleeting that if you looked too long it vanished—but it was there, in a first glance, and Tara had seen that same look on Jago's face several times when he was unaware of her watching. An arrogant, powerful, almost *noble* look. She walked slowly along, curious to see if there were any more pictures similar to that one. Several were of women, and their names were gently redolent of the past: 'Catriona Ishbeal Cameron.' 'Flora Barbae Cameron.' And some men, more recent, but no more like that startling first one. And then Tara reached the end, and was almost back in the spot where she had begun, and she stopped in front of the last picture, and went almost dizzy for a few seconds, and had to hold on to the rail for support. For just a moment it seemed—it seemed as if she had been looking at a mirror. The girl in the picture looked down at her, and the faint smile on her face seemed for an instant to grow—but it was all imagination, of course, and as Tara stepped

nearer she knew that it had been a trick of the light. Even so she was intrigued to read the name at the bottom of the frame: 'Helen Stuart Cameron. 1791-1880.'

How odd, she thought, because Helen's my second name. Coincidence, of course; Helen was a very common Scots name. But even so, something lingered even after Tara had gone downstairs and picked up the shopping bag and stood for a moment in that huge cold hall, wondering where she should eat and drink. Then she remembered. There were chairs—or had been—in the huge dining room to the left of the hall. How nice to sit by a window and look out and drink coffee, and imagine living there, seeing that view all day and every day if you wanted.

She opened the door gently, and dust rose and swirled for a moment up from the carpet, and then fell. Tara crossed the room and a chandelier winked and gleamed faintly in the light from the window as it moved in the disturbed air. There was the faintest tinkling sound as the glass fragments shivered then settled. She moved a chair and dusted it before she sat down. The windows hadn't been cleaned for years, but there was no real dirt in the air to cling to the glass, only the fine powdery dust that was everywhere; and the view was clear and sharply defined—and. quite breathtakingly beautiful from this angle. Tara poured out coffee and lit a cigarette, for she was not yet hungry. The coffee steamed gently in that huge cold room, and she curved her fingers round the plastic cup gratefully. It was hot and sweet, and even the cigarette was perfect. For several minutes Tara sat there relaxing, contentment filling her as she looked out, and carefully avoided thinking about those pictures—for they were too disturbing, and before she went home she intended to go up and look again. Until then, better to just admire the view . . . The view, which most oddly was not quite as clear as it had been. For one absurd, ridiculous moment Tara wondered if it was the coffee steaming the window—then laughed at the thought. How ridiculous! But even as she watched, the distant sea vanished—quite simply dissolved in a

sudden curtain of white. She stood, not alarmed, more curious, and went to the window and rubbed it. Nothing happened. There was no sudden magic clearance of the glass—because it wasn't that which was clouded. The mist was outside. Thick, white, and sudden, blanketing everything in the distance—and rolling nearer every moment that passed.

It was then that Tara had her first twinge of alarm. Without further thought she put down the cup on the chair, hurried out to the front door and flung it open. Thick white vapour swirled in—and now she couldn't even see the gardens. With the suddenness characteristic of these Scottish mists, the house was, covered all round by a thick white wall, clinging, wet—and deadly. Now suddenly frightened, Tara slammed the door shut and ran back into the room where she gulped down her coffee as if it might give her strength. She drew deeply on the cigarette. What to do now? Try and get down to home quickly? But even as that idea crossed her mind, she rejected it. She would be lost within minutes of setting out. Lost in a thick wet cotton wool mass that could disguise and distort even the most familiar landmarks so that everything became alien and frightening. Instinct told Tara that she was safe here, in the house—but for how long? How long..would she have to stay a prisoner? Soon darkness would fall, and what then? There was one thing about an old house in daylight—quite another when it grew dark with no light or heat.

The cigarette burnt down and she flung it in the fireplace, then looked at it. She turned towards the window. The white clinging, *solid* curtain mocked her and she turned quickly back again. That settled it. This could last for hours—maybe all night. Trying not to shudder, Tara looked round, sizing everything up, deciding quite simply what would make good fuel for a fire. She breathed a sigh of relief for the impulse that had made her throw matches and cigarettes in the bag—and the magazine. If there was wood, the paper would start it off burning. And now was the time—*now*—before it got too dark to see. She went quickly out and along the narrow passage to the

kitchen. It was as good a place as any to look, and there might even be coal. With hopeful heart, Tara opened the door to the kitchen and went in.

Over an hour later she was sitting in front of a crackling fire in the huge room. Smoke curled upwards, and hot sparks danced crazily before vanishing up the black chimney, while outside it grew darker and colder, and she gave a little shiver as she looked towards the window. She had been looking every few minutes, just in case . . . But it was useless, she knew it even as she did it. The mist was here to stay, certainly for a few hours, possibly until morning. Tara looked at the pile of fuel stacked neatly by the fire. It had been hard work, but there was enough to keep her from freezing until morning came, and a fire was always good company, even if it wasn't a roaring one like Lalla's. And what would Lalla be doing? Tara bit her lip worriedly. She wasn't the type to panic, but she would be anxious even so. Would she, Tara wondered, realize that she would have the sense to stay put? She hoped so—and worrying about it wouldn't help. Determinedly she knelt and piled a few more twigs on the flames. Then, looking at her watch, rationing herself, for there were empty hours to be filled, she poured her second cup of coffee and lit her second cigarette from a twig on the fire, for every match was precious now, and nothing must be wasted. The coffee was still hot, and there were two cups still left in the flask, and all the food. She would eat supper at nine, then try to sleep on two chairs. Tara had seen a mattress upstairs, but it had looked heavy and cold—and she knew she wasn't strong enough to drag it down.

She sighed, took a deep satisfying swallow of coffee, and looked down at the yellow crackling flames, and felt the warmth creeping out slowly from the hearth. She regretted not bringing the manuscript. There would have been sufficient light to read by, crouched in front of the fire, and it would have taken away some of

the dreadful lonely feeling that was reaching out towards her from the darkened corners of the room . . . 'Stop it!' she told herself firmly. 'It's your own fault—and the time will soon pass.' It helped, talking out loud, threw back the darkness with the sound, the echo of her words, and she wondered what would happen if she sang . . . And then she heard it. Unmistakably, *unbelievably*, heard Jago's voice calling her name—and for one frightening, hair-tingling moment she thought of the pictures upstairs, and wondered . . . Then it came again, louder, nearer—and she heard his footsteps in the hall and ran to the door, nearly spilling her coffee in her haste.

'I'm here!' She forgot for a few moments that she didn't *like* him. It was such a relief to know she wasn't after all the last person on earth—but when she saw him walking towards her, it all came back, the fear, the self-consciousness, and she faltered and said absurdly:

'What are you doing here?'

'Well now, that's a lovely warm welcome!' He stopped in front of her, and he was laughing again, and she didn't like that, either. He was very tall, and dressed in denim jeans with matching jacket, unzipped to reveal a thick black polo-necked sweater, and a thick black leather belt with solid square buckle. And it was so dark—and *he* was so dark—that Tara was obscurely frightened again and turned quickly away to go back into her *safe* room with its fire. He followed her in, and she saw him swing a rucksack off his back on to the floor, and she looked from him to it, and back again, face puzzled. 'I don't understand,' she said.

He ran his fingers through his soaking wet hair. 'No, you wouldn't.' He said it lightly, tolerantly, as if she were simple. 'You idiot,' he went on, 'I've come for *you.'*

'But—in this? I don't—I don't -' she stopped, because she was beginning to stammer.

'Lalla came to me in great alarm waving your note,' he was pulling up another chair as he, spoke, and sat down in it with a huge sigh. 'Ah, that's better. What's that? Coffee? Got any for me?'

'Yes, of course.' She poured him some from the flask into her cup and handed it to him. Belatedly, feeling rude and childish, she said: 'I'm sorry— but I was so startled -'

'Don't—please.' He lifted his free hand. 'I have had *warmer* welcomes in my time from young women—but don't force it.' He fumbled in the denim jacket pocket. 'Want a cigarette?'

'No, thanks. But this mist—you found your way through in *this?'*

'I know it like the back of my hand—or thought I did. Had a few tricky moments about a quarter of a mile back. It's like a quagmire—I went up to my knees in it.' He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. 'But I promised Lalla I'd find you—and I have.'

'You think we'll find our way down in the dark?' She looked doubtfully at the now grey wall outside, and growing darker with every minute that passed. He shook his head.

'I had some slight hopes—but no, I don't think so. Not now. Not after what happened.'

'Then why -Tara felt herself stiffening. 'Then why have you come ?'

'I've told you,' he looked at her, and those dark eyes were glinting in the firelight, but whether with amusement or annoyance she could not tell, 'because I promised Lalla I would. She didn't like the thought of you being here alone all night—although she hoped you'd have the sense to stay here.'

'As you can see I have.' Tara got up from the adjoining chair and walked nervously to the window. 'I'm not frightened of the dark, or

ghosts or anything,' and as she said it, she fleetingly remembered the portraits, but now was not the time to mention them; there was something far more worrying on her mind.

He lifted a disbelieving eyebrow. 'No? Not a little bit nervous?'

'No.' She said it very firmly.

He shook his head. 'Then I've wasted my journey.'

'I didn't mean that! But you can't—you can't—' she floundered, seeing his mocking expression.

'Ah! I get it. I can't stay? Is that what you mean?'

'Well, yes. I mean—well! Look, couldn't w-we try and m-make it back?' Darn it, why was she shaking like a silly schoolgirl? It was most disconcerting. It was his turn to stand up. But not nervously, most decisively. He put his empty cup down on the mantelpiece and strode over to her at the window. Taking Tara's arm, he swung her round. 'Look- -' he pointed out. 'Look at that. I've just *struggled* up here, because if I hadn't offered, Lalla would have come herself—and I know damn well she'd not have made it—and all I get from you is frightened bleating about "shouldn't we try and get back?" Now what the hell is it? Do you think everyone's out to seduce you or something?' _

'Oh!' Tara took hold of the fingers on her arm and tried to prise them off. 'Really! I -'

'Really. Yes! Come on, out with it. Is that what you're so goddamned nervous of? Because if it is tell me, and let's stop beating about the bush.'

It was fortunate that the darkness was kindly and hid the heightened colour in her face. 'How dare you!' she managed at last. 'W-why do you always say such awful things to me ?'

'Because, my sweet child, you ask for them! Look —I came up here because I had no choice. I didn't expect to be welcomed with open arms—not by *you*—but I didn't imagine that you'd think I was some old lecher——'

'I didn't!' she gasped. 'I just—it's—well, it took me by surprise, that's all.' And she stopped. Damn him! He made her feel so young and *stupid*, somehow. Taking a deep breath, she said more calmly, 'I'm very grateful you've come. Of course. And I appreciate it. And of course I d-didn't think anything of the kind -' she nearly faltered at his disbelieving snort, but swallowed and went on: 'I've got some f-food. Are you hungry?'

'No, not yet. Save it. I've brought some anyway. We'll need it later when it gets really cold. Why don't you build up that fire?' And he went over and began piling logs on, leaving Tara to rub her arms where those hard fingers had dug in. Vaguely disturbed, she followed.

'Oh, please, don't waste them -' she began, and was silenced with his steady look.

'Keep a good fire going—I'll find some more fuel after. You'd have frozen with that tiny glimmer- it's a good job I came. Right, I'll unpack first, then get some more wood.' And as if sensing that she was about to argue, he added: 'I know where there's plenty. You didn't look in the cellars, did you?' Tara shook her head. 'No, I thought not. There's piles of peat and wood there. I'll get my torch out first. Gome and help me.'

Tara followed .Jago wordlessly, wondering if he always took charge like that. If he was a teacher— *if*—that would explain it, but she still didn't believe him. He knelt and unstrapped the rucksack and began to pull out a blanket, then another one. He looked up as Tara put them on a chair. 'Two,' he said, and grinned. 'One for you. One for me.'

She took a deep breath but held her tongue. He handed her a flask. 'Soup,' he explained. 'And I've got some cake and sandwiches—ah yes, here. Careful, put the parcel on the mantel. There's a torch—here we are -' and a yellow path of light shot across the room. 'That'll do for now. Right, I'll go and get some fuel. I've got a groundsheet in the rucksack. There's a bed upstairs with a mattress on it—I'll bring it down after. Stay there.' With those disturbing words he took the torch and went out of the room, and Tara was left standing quite still by the chairs, wondering if she had heard aright. She licked suddenly dry lips with her tongue. This was worse than she had imagined—far worse. But she knew better than to say anything. Not now—not again.

Belatedly she realized that she should have offered to go down to the cellars, at least to' hold the torch while Jago collected peat or wood. Quickly she went to the door and felt her way along the corridor towards the kitchen. The cellar door was just before it, and open. From below came sounds, and a wavering light showed faintly. She called out: 'Can I help?' The sounds stopped, then came Jago's voice:

'Yes—but mind the stairs—hold on, I'll bring the torch to light them.' She heard his steps, saw the hard beam slanting up from the cellar, and heard his voice again: 'Slowly now.' Holding to the wooden rail, Tara descended between whitewashed walls, and waited for Jago to guide the way. He held the beam downwards, steadily, and she followed him. Whatever she thought about him—and her private thoughts at that moment were little short of chaotic—she had to admire his directness of purpose. He had found a large wooden box

and had been busy stacking peat and wood in it. It was nearly full. He handed Tara the torch, and their hands met in a brief accidental touch that made her want to jerk away. But she didn't—she feared his mocking scorn more than that sudden disquieting tingle.

'Fine.' His voice was impersonal. 'Let me finish filling this, and then we'll go. That should do the night—and we know where to come if we need more, don't we?'

And quite suddenly the words came out. She hadn't intended them, didn't know what made her say them, yet could not have resisted if she had tried. 'You know this house very well, don't you?'

He turned round from stacking the last few pieces of wood and his eyes glinted darkly in the torchlight. She saw his grin too, and her lips tightened.

'That seems a loaded question. What exactly *do* you mean?'

'Just that I—I saw a picture -'

He didn't let her finish. 'Ah! So you did, did you? Hmm, and tell me, Miss Tara Blaine, what did you make of it, eh?'

And he had finished the stacking now, and stood up straight and tall before her, and cocked his head enquiringly.

'It—it could be you,' she said, because there was nothing else to say, and *he knew* anyway.

'Yes, so it could.' He picked up the box and nodded. 'Right, lead the way. We can't talk down here.' She had no choice, and he followed, guided by the torch beam that somehow wasn't as steady as his had been. Once upstairs in the room again, he put the box down near her small pile of twigs and turned to her. 'All right. It could be me—it isn't, obviously—but it was a relative of mine, my great- great-

grandfather, give or take a "great" or two. I can't honestly remember. The point is, if you've seen it, and recognized it, someone else might. I think I'll take it down.'

'Oh!' Tara was startled. 'No, don't.' Then a sudden afterthought. 'Why—and how—I mean -'she stopped with the sudden feeling that she was treading on dangerously thin ice.

'Please *do* go on.' His voice was smooth, polite, and with the merest glimmer of humour in it. He's enjoying this, she thought wildly. It made her say angrily:

'You're a sadistic beast I No, I won't go on. I don't care who you are—do you hear me?' And she moved to the mantelpiece and put the torch down on it with a bang.

The faint beam was diffused. The light in the room was vague and shadowy, although the fire spread a certain amount of warmth and illumination. Tara saw the slight, careless shrug. 'Right, so we'll drop the subject. Now, the fire's safe. I'm going up to bring the mattress down—if it's not too damp. Are you going to bring the torch or not?'

His tone quite clearly implied that he didn't give a damn either way, so she nodded reluctantly. 'Of course I'll bring it. Now?'

'Yes.' And he waited for her to go first, then, when she hesitated as a *very* startling thought came into her mind, he took the torch himself and began to walk out, leaving Tara with no choice but to follow, quickly, hastily, almost stumbling. And now, as they went up those stairs, she didn't care about his scorn, amusement, or anything else. She was going to say what was in her mind. She would do it here and now; the sooner the better—because if she didn't...

'Look, just a moment.' They were at the top of the stairs, on the landing, near *that* picture, but it had to be said, and she did. *'One*

mattress we're taking down?' She couldn't help the slightly high note of her voice.

He stopped abruptly and stood looking down at her, but there was no light on his face, only the beam of light steady on the floor, and she had to imagine the expression on his features—and that wasn't difficult.

'Yes.'

'F-for whom?' she swallowed hard.

'Ah!' And there was a wealth of meaning in that. 'I've no intention of sleeping on a floor if I can help it. So it's for us both—for it gets damned near freezing here at night, even with that fire—and if you're concerned about the proprieties I assure you you have no need to worry at all. I shall treat you like a sister.'

'No,' said Tara. 'I'm sorry, but really, it's a bit much. You have your mattress—I'll take a chair.'

'Please yourself.' He paused, then added softly : 'Is that all? May I go now?'

'Oh!' She struggled for words, heard him laugh, then he was striding along the wide landing, and she followed. Her heart beat rapidly at thus having her fears confirmed. He expected, he *actually* expected her to sleep next to him on a *mattress I* She gritted her teeth. The man was utterly impossible.

He shone the torch briefly into a room, and the beam came to rest on a huge double bed with the mattress lying on top. 'Here,' he thrust the torch back at her. 'Hold it steady while I feel -' and then he was leaning over, pushing and prodding at the lumpy blue mattress. 'Hm, better than I thought. Almost like home. Amazing really, I imagined

it would be damp. Right, I'll roll it up and you can lead the way back.' Silently seething, Tara held the beam steady as he bent and rolled it up then heaved it into his arms. He nodded, and his voice came muffled: 'Off you go.'

Bossy beast! she thought, leading the way, careful to direct the beam so that they could both see. Do this—do that—and he expects to be obeyed. Serve him right if I switched the torch off and let him struggle. And the temptation was so overwhelming that her finger actually trembled on the switch— but she knew she dared not. It was quite absurd, but so strong was his personality that she could not defy him.

Half an hour later they were sitting by a good fire drinking hot soup and eating sandwiches. Everything would have been perfect, reflected Tara, as she gazed into crackling yellow flames, if only it hadn't been *him* with her. She couldn't relax—and he knew it—and seemed amused by the fact. Everything was coloured by the brittle atmosphere that surrounded them, every word charged, so that she wondered fleetingly exactly what everything he said *did* mean, and had to hesitate before answering. He was perfectly relaxed, that was obvious by the way he sat, one elbow crooked over the back of his chair, long legs crossed, head occasionally turning to look out at the ghostly grey night, the frightening opaque wall of silence surrounding them.

'Cigarette?' His voice broke into her chaotic thoughts.

'What? Oh, thanks.' She took one from the proffered packet and waited for him to flick his lighter into life. Their eyes met briefly, darkly, across the flame and her heart lurched. There had been—just for an instant—something so sensual about that look, so charged, that

her hand trembled on the cigarette and she gave a little gasp as she drew in that first mouthful.

'Not too strong?'

'No. I—I don't smoke a lot,' she said quickly.

'Nor me. But there are times, like this,' and the casually waved hand expressed everything, without words being necessary, 'when I feel like one. What time do you make it?'

Tara peered down at her watch, holding it to catch the vivid, lively firelight. They had switched the torch off to save the battery.

'Nearly nine. Oh!'

'What is it?'

'I was just thinking about Lalla,' and she had to bite back a faint sob. 'She'll be awfully worried -'

'Stop it. It doesn't do you any good—and it certainly can't help her. Of course she'll be worried. , But I made her a promise—and I don't break them. I said I'd find you . and either bring you home or stay with you—and she knows I know the route like the back of my hand. So -' he gave an indolent shrug and drew deeply on the cigarette, 'relax and make the best of it. I suggest we settle down to sleep soon. This mist might clear away about six, and if it does we can get back off straight away.'

Alarm flared within her, and she Wished she hadn't spoken. Of course they would have to sleep some time. Of *course* she knew she was safe—didn't she? Tara looked quickly into the dancing flames as if seeking an answer. Do I? she wondered. I don't *know* him, not really. I certainly don't like him— but that's no guarantee of protection. And she trembled slightly as the irrational fear swept

through her. She moved uneasily, heartbeats erratic. His next words seemed, awfully, to confirm her fears.

'We'll have a drink of whisky. Lalla made me bring a flask, and it'll help us to sleep -' and then, as she turned wide, horror-stricken eyes on him, he stopped. 'What on earth have I said?'

Too alarmed to care, Tara stood up and walked to the window, praying desperately for the miracle to happen—the mist to clear. Then, hearing' his footsteps behind her, hearing him begin: 'Tara?' she whirled round.

'Don't touch me! Go away—leave me -' and then she was being shaken roughly, so that the next words were shattered into fragments, shaken so hard that her teeth chattered.

'You stupid little *idiot!'* he said each word clearly and concisely, as if he needed to impress them on her. 'Are you actually frightened of *me?'*

'Y-yes.' She shrank away from the touch of those strong brown hands, and with a gesture of impatience he released her and ran his fingers through his hair.

'You really are the most *exasperating* woman!' He spread his arms wide in a helpless gesture. 'What do I have to do to prove I'm not a sex maniac? Tell me!' Then he began to laugh, and Tara's temper flared.

'Stop it!' she gasped. 'Stop it—you're hateful! Always l-laughing at me. I hate it, do you hear?' And she put her hands to her ears, tears of tiredness and Weakness filling her eyes and spilling out over her cheeks, and her soft golden hair tumbled about her face as she shook her head helplessly. Jago stopped laughing, and looked at her, but she didn't see that look, didn't see the softening of that hard brownness,

or the way his jaw muscles tightened. But she felt his hands on hers, pulling hers away from her ears, and heard him say in an oddly gentle tone:

'I'm sorry, Tara. You're tired, and I'm an unfeeling swine to laugh at you. Don't cry—please.' Then, as she looked up, very slowly, to face him, he added: 'I only asked you to have a drink because I thought it would relax you. You're all tense—all right. I understand your feelings, but I assure you I'm not going to make a pass at you.'

She gave a shuddering sigh and flicked the hair from her face. In those few words he had made her feel quite ridiculously childish. 'I-I'm sorry,' she said. 'And I will have a drink. Just a drop. B-but I'm still going to sleep on the chair.'

'All right. If I were noble, or a gentleman, I'd offer to let you have the mattress, but I'm too damn tired—and I've tried to sleep on chairs before. You haven't, I'll bet. I'll leave room for you when you change your mind.'

But that was one thing Tara knew she wouldn't do.

She hadn't really slept, and a slight sound, a distant scamper of tiny feet roused her to full awareness. Tara shivered as the full impact of her position came to her, and she tried to move, but couldn't. She was too cold, and too stiff, and the chair seemed to be digging in all over her body spitefully, viciously, *frozenly*. Biting her lip, she tried to sit up, stifling a groan, and looked over to where Jago lay on the mattress only feet away. She could barely see anything, only the black huddled shape of him, and there was his heavy regular breathing to tell her that he was fast asleep. He had kept his word, and the other half of the mattress stretched invitingly empty. Tara looked at her watch in the last glimmers of a dying fire. Eleven-

thirty. He had been asleep for two hours. Two hours in which she had sat, wrapped in a blanket, growing gradually colder and colder and more uncomfortable! and during which all sorts of weird and frightening images had come to plague and tease her. Tara's head was heavy, her leg ached, and she knew, quite suddenly, that she could not spend another minute on that chair. Stumbling, teeth chattering with cold, goose pimples raised, she carefully moved from the hardest chair in the world and very *silently* and *carefully* lay down on the mattress beside the sleeping man and pulled her blanket over her. The softness was unbelievable—but she was still freezing. She lay rigid, not daring to move, stiff as a board, and about as cold, and a gruff, sleep-filled voice said in her ear: 'For God's sake lie properly, woman- -' she felt blankets being pulled and moved, and his was over her, and hers was over him, and she was too frightened to speak or utter a sound until he added: 'Move up—there.' His arm was pulling her roughly towards him, then she was somehow curled up in front of him—and the warmth was immediate and comforting. Faintly she heard: 'And if I hear one more peep out of you—about *anything*—so help me, I'll *thump* you—understand?' The last words were blurred, but the meaning was quite plain.

'Yes,' she murmured, trying not to shake—and she really was warmer—it was almost miraculous. 'Yes, I understand.' But he was asleep again, she knew it by his breathing. Slowly, very slowly, Tara relaxed too, and fell asleep.

Tara woke suddenly, and the room was freezing, because her face was so cold she couldn't feel it. For a moment she lay there puzzled, not knowing where she was, or who this was—and then she remembered, and turned slightly, unable to move much for the heavy arm across her body. She saw Jago's face dimly, his eyes dark and shadowed, and knew by his breathing that he was still deeply asleep. Her body was warm, and she wanted to snuggle down, snuggle

against him—but dared not. She had woken because she was thirsty, and she looked up and saw the flask on the mantelpiece and licked her parched lips. If she moved ever so slowly, and lifted his arm ever so gently...

It took a full five minutes, but it was bliss to stand up and stretch, and look out of the window—and see that the mist was lessening, very slightly. She drank the lukewarm coffee—just half a cup—and flicked on the torch for a few seconds to see the time. Nearly five. Her heart lifted. Perhaps in an hour or two ... But first she had to get back without disturbing *him*—and she almost slid on to the mattress, edging just that bit nearer so that the blankets were over her, for she had never imagined it could be as cold as this—and, sobering thought, if she had been alone, she could have frozen. She turned towards him gently, carefully, and lifted the blankets to her chin, suppressing one small, inescapable shiver.

Then quite suddenly she knew he wasn't so deeply asleep. Something had changed, the quality of his breathing maybe, but it wasn't the same, and there was a tension suddenly there, and she was aware of it and tried to force her breathing to slow, but it was difficult. She closed her eyes, willing herself to feel sleepy, and felt his arm come over her, round her waist, heard the mumbled voice, still full of sleep, say: 'Oh, darling -' She gave a murmured exclamation and tried to move, but his arm pinned her down, and then—and then—Jago kissed her. It was a sleep-warmed kiss, his face and lips relaxed with drowsiness still, but awake enough to have found her mouth, until, horrified, yet filled with a strange frightening excitement, Tara found the strength to push him away—and he woke up.

Their eyes met across the shadowy inches between them, and she saw the gradual awareness come into them, and then he looked across the room, puzzled. Tara sat up—and so did Jago.

'You said—you *said* -' she began, trembling.

'I'm sorry.' He ran his hand over his face, rubbing his jaw. 'I was dreaming—I'm sorry, Tara.'

Her breast heaved, and she put her hand to her mouth. 'Go away!'

'No, let me explain first. It wasn't -'

'I don't want to hear!' She still trembled—but lacked the will to move away. Who had he thought was lying beside him? Who was he so used to sleeping with that it was normal to wake up and kiss? The chaotic, disturbing questions tormented Tara as she sat there huddled in the blankets, and she was strongly, tinglingly aware of him so near—that if she reached out one hand ... She closed her eyes. It didn't matter. He had been asleep—or nearly—and the minute she had resisted, he had stopped. But there was one thing more disturbing to Tara than the kiss itself—and that was her own reaction to it.

She had enjoyed it—wanted it to go on. Shakily she got to her feet—and he followed her, touched her arm, took hold of her and turned her round.

'Tara, I didn't know -' he began. She stayed still. She didn't know why it should be, but the tingling on her arms where his hands touched wasn't her imagination, it was *real.* And the desire to fight him, to reject him all the time—that was gone too. Subconsciously she imagined it was because it was five in the morning, the weakest time, when mind and body are at lowest ebb—but she didn't care any more, she was cold and sleepy.

She looked up at him, her hair tousled, tumbling about her cheeks, her face pale with fatigue, looked up and watched him with a kind of hungry intensity—and was reminded of Fiona and the way she too had regarded him. He stood still, tall, dark, and shadowy, almost blurred. But there was no mistaking those broad shoulders, the proud

tilt of his head, the animal magnetism he positively radiated. Tara shivered, but whether with excitement or cold, she did not know.

'It's all right,' she said softly, and looked down at his hands on her arms, feeling that she might fall if he wasn't holding her thus. 'It's all right—I know you- thought I was s-someone else.' Her head drooped, it was heavy, so heavy—'I'll sit in the chair -' she began, then felt her legs buckling beneath her, and the shivering and the trembling were real now, and obvious.

She heard his indrawn breath, heard him say: 'You're frozen! you'll be ill—lie down, Tara, I'll keep you warm—and don't *worry.'*

She allowed him to lead her back to the mattress because she was too weak to resist, and she felt strangely comforted, almost like a child again, being looked after by a mother as she obeyed wordlessly his soft commands, and then he was lying beside her, his long length against her, arms round her, the blankets tightly tucked in round them both—but now he had changed. So near, so intimately close- yet he had gone that distant impersonal way again, and as she closed her eyes she said, because she guessed now: 'You act like a doctor or something.' And the words were softly blurred, because the warmth of him was stealing through, comforting her whole being, and she barely heard the words she had known she would hear in reply: 'I *am* a doctor, Tara.'

When she woke again it was lighter, but now she knew where she was; there was no puzzling, half frightened awareness. Tara opened her eyes and lay there quite still, fully relaxed, very warm—and comfortable. Jago still slept beside her, his arms round her. He stirred faintly and murmured: 'Two pints,' and Tara smiled to herself. Beer or blood? She should have known he was a doctor. It had nagged at the back of her mind when he had been with Fiona. And in part it

explained that impersonal look of his—partly but not entirely. Tara had yet to make the final discovery that would set all the pieces of the jigsaw tumbling into place. Something else he had told her the previous night came back. He was related to the old Laird—and he wanted to keep it a secret. And if she hadn't been so stupidly contrary he would have told her more. She passed her tongue over her dry lips. She was more refreshed now, after just a short sleep, than she had been after the longer one. And she knew why. Before, there had been the tension because of the bizarre circumstances, but the second time she had been too tired to fight him—and more, she had trusted him. She had known she was safe and warm—utterly safe for as long as she stayed there. She turned her head slightly to look at him, wanting to see his face without him being aware of it.

She faced him now, and she looked at him as if wanting to imprint the image of his features in her mind. His hair was over his forehead, nearly down to those dark thick eyebrows. His face was relaxed in sleep, not hard and strong now, but soft and shadowed. And there was something very gentle about him. Tara's lips curved in an involuntary smile. If he knew! Strange that he had admitted being a doctor—perhaps he had been too tired to realize that he was giving himself away. She knew now, and it was somehow pleasant to be in his confidence about something. She had an almost irresistible urge to reach out and stroke his face and wake him, to tell him it was time to be getting ready to go--and she had to clench her hand tightly to stop herself from doing it. This is ridiculous, she thought faintly. I can't stand the man, and yet here I am—she closed her eyes for a moment. Ridiculous, of course. It was only because of what had happened. Of *course* it was. She was simply grateful to him for turning up out of that awful mist, as he had, and taking charge in a most satisfactory way—relieving what would have been the intolerable loneliness of a night alone in a freezing mansion with only mice and ghosts for company...

'Hello,' he opened his eyes suddenly, and grinned. Tara smiled back.

'Hello,' she answered.

'Tell me.,' he said, 'do you come here often?'

'Well,' she pretended to think about it, 'not often —only iii fog.'

'Ah!' he gave a slight nod, as if satisfied. 'That explains it.'

'Explains what?'

'Why I don't often see you on this mattress. It is comfy, isn't it?'

'As good as any in the Ritz—not that I've ever been,' she added hastily.

'No,' he frowned. 'Me neither. Well, I suppose it's time we got up. I mean, it's very pleasant here, but we can't really stay here all day. Or can we?' And he cocked a hopeful eyebrow at her.

She considered that thoughtfully. 'Not really. Not *all* day.' It was most odd. A little harmless game— yet she was enjoying it more than anything since too long ago...

'Mmm, yes. What time do you make it ?'

'Haven't you got a watch?' she asked severely.

'Yes, but I think you're lying on it at the moment and I can't be bothered moving.'

'Oh well, it's—er- -' she squinted hopefully. 'Um—nearly eight.'

He groaned. 'And I'm starving. What food is there?'

'Do you want me to go and look?' She shifted imperceptibly, and he said:

'No, not yet. In a few minutes. I don't really want to move yet—I'm too darn lazy. Besides, I think both arms are paralyzed—I'm not really sure if I *can* move them."

She gave a huge mock sigh. 'That's a relief! I'm safe for a while.' She didn't know why she said it. It was getting rather near to the forbidden ground— but he seemed not to notice.

'Thanks for the sympathy! The least you could have done was offer to massage them back to life— after all, you've been lying on them for hours.'

'At least three—and not both arms,' she rejoined sweetly. 'And are you implying I'm heavy, because -'

'Heaven forbid! You're a mere feather, nay, gossamer weight, but -' he pulled a face, 'one needs to move occasionally, doesn't one?' And he smiled. It was a nice smile, the sort he gave to Fiona or Lalla, and Tara's heart lurched uncomfortably. To cover up, to get back to that nice *normal* badinage, she said quickly: 'How did you chip your tooth?'

'What? Oh!' he grinned. 'In a rugger scrum— and before you ask, that's also where I broke my nose—or hadn't you noticed?'

'Er—yes, I did wonder. Rugger -' she shuddered. 'Ugh! Rough game.'

'Rough?' he pondered that for a few moments. 'Yes, you have a point. It is a mite ungenteel—I don't play any more. Got some sense now.'

Then Tara did something ridiculous, startling. She didn't even *know* she was going to do it until it actually happened.

She reached up her free hand and very gently touched his nose, felt the slight crookedness—that most *attractive* crookedness midway.

'You poor thing,' she said, and meant it. Then, realizing, confused, she added: 'Oh! Sorry! I didn't——

'Don't stop now! Don't apologise either,' he grinned, but it wasn't quite a grin, and his face was near —so near, and warm, and somehow, she couldn't ever remember afterwards how it happened, but they must have both moved forward just that little essential space, and their lips met in a long, lingering, warm, tender, *magical* kiss that went on and on —

Tara spoke first. 'Mmm, that was nice, but we shouldn't -'

'Isn't it nice to do things we shouldn't?' And he kissed her again, longer, even nicer if that was possible—and it was, just.

'You promised,' she said, after an eternity when they managed to part their lips for a few brief seconds to gather breath, 'you *promised* not to make a pass at me.

'I'm not making a pass, I'm kissing you.'

'Ah!' The logic was wrong somewhere. But he said it so convincingly that it sounded right. And she didn't care anyway. This was right too.

'Oh, I see,' and she put her hand up to stroke his face, and his arms tightened round her, and they weren't paralysed at all. 'Your face is rough,' she said after a moment, 'and it hurts.'

'It usually is first thing in the morning. You didn't bring a razor, did you ?'

'Forgot it! Silly me!'

'Then,' he said decisively, 'you'll just have to put up with it, won't you?' And he kissed her again.

Then suddenly it wasn't a joke, or lighthearted, any more. Quite suddenly it changed, and they drew apart, and their eyes met in that deep unspoken message that is as old as time, and Tara felt the throb of his heart, and his deep unsteady breathing, and saw what was in his eyes, and she closed her own. Before it went any further, she knew she must move away, *must* move...

'Tara?' First it was a question, then he said it again: 'Oh, Tara,' and there was that in it the second time that melted her bones and turned her blood-to fire, and she dared not open her eyes, because of what she knew he would see in them. Jago's hand moved across her back, and round...

'No,' she said—and it was a very great, painful effort.

There was silence. And he was still. Then he spoke, and his voice was ragged, almost harsh. 'No?'

Tara shook her head imperceptibly—but it was enough.

He took a deep shaky breath. 'All right,' he said. 'We'd better get up, hadn't we?' And there was a blank *hurt* in his voice that made Tara long to comfort him—to reassure him. But she dared not. Not now. The situation was so explosive, the air in the room sparking and crackling with that invisible tension, that she dared not even touch him, not even for one instant of time.

He moved away, without looking at her, moved away and got to his feet, ran his hands through his hair, zipped up his jacket, and went out of the room, Tara swallowed hard, and her face burnt like lire. Then slowly, stiffly, she got to her feet and brushed down her sadly crumpled sweater and trousers.

She went to the window and looked out. The mist had not cleared, but it was thinner, faintly yellowish with the sun trying to get

through. It would soon be safe for them to leave .. . She didn't want to think about what had happened. Her nerves were one jangling mass of taut sharp pain, and she wanted to cry, but she wasn't going to cry. Not now—not here.

She heard his footsteps coming along the hall and she hugged herself nervously, pressing her fingers into her arms, not looking round.

And Jago came in. 'There's a spring near the back door,' he said, and she turned slowly. Had she expected anger? He wasn't angry—he looked much as he normally did, and she relaxed slightly. He had rinsed his face in the water, it was still wet, as was the front of his black hair. 'I'll be tidying up. Then we'll go. It's light enough to see our way down—or will be in half an hour.'

'I'll go now.' She moved quickly past him and went out, along the hall, down the steps to the kitchen. When she returned everything was packed away, blankets, groundsheet; and flasks, and he was waiting for her.

Tara wanted to say something, but she didn't know what, only that she felt utterly wretched. She picked up her shopping bag and he said: 'Give it to me. It'll go in the rucksack.' Silently she handed it to him, and he added: 'Cheer up. It didn't happen.'

She looked at him then, and he gave her a faint crooked smile. 'If it makes you feel any better, I'll apologize,' he said.

She took a deep breath. 'No, don't,' she answered. 'It wouldn't anyway.'

'I've got to say something before we go,' he went on. 'Just this. I honestly didn't *intend* -' he stopped briefly. 'Put it down to body chemistry.' He shrugged. 'Oh, what the hell! I thought I was clever—

but I wasn't as clever as I thought, and I am sorry, because I'd promised you you were safe and--'

'Please stop,' Tara breathed. 'It was as much my fault as yours. It was so lovely and warm there -' she gave a small laugh. 'And it was nice just talking—well, joking really. I—I didn't know it w-would turn out like that.' And she watched his face, and bit her lip in distress. The faint smudges under her eyes accentuated her early morning beauty, and bright unshed tears glistened on her lashes. She saw the softening in his own darker brown eyes, and wondered how she had ever disliked him. Had she really? It didn't seem possible. He was everything that a man should be, strong yet gentle. He could have been nasty with her for her apparent leading him on—could even now be sulking, sullen, but he wasn't. He took everything in his stride, and never faltered. Oh, Jago! she thought. I've been wrong about you. So wrong. And one day she would tell him. But not now, not now.

Half an hour later they were well on their way home. At a particularly rough spot, Tara's leg hurt, and she faltered, wincing. Jago turned round, saw her face, and took her hand. 'I'll help you,' he said quietly. The mist was patchy now, thick in parts, thin and swirling in others, and their hair was damp and stringy, because that mist was as wet as any rain. Tara was glad of his hand, warm and strong, and they half scrambled, half walked down in a silence that was companionable and relaxing. It seemed unbelievable—but suddenly the white swirling curtain lifted, and she saw the two houses standing side by side, and squeezed that gentle, comforting hand. 'Home,' she raid. 'Isn't it marvellous to be home again?' And she saw him smile. Then, almost as if it had been planned, a small wiry figure came out of the back door of Jago's house and stood watching them. Morag, and the expression on her face spoke volumes—would have been almost comical at any other time. Tara

froze, and without thinking why, slipped her hand out of Jago's. She heard his muttered oath, then:

'Well, Tara, it looks as though it'll be all over the island within a few hours that we've just spent the night together.'

CHAPTER FIVE

TARA shivered, suddenly cold at Jago's words. 'Oh, no!'

'Oh yes. You can bet she's seen my bed not slept in, and she'll have been in Lalla's—fishing. It's just bad luck that we didn't get home before her. An hour ago -' he shrugged. They were at the road now, walking along it, and Lalla came to the door, then ran down the path towards them.

'Oh, my dears,' she began. 'You don't know how glad I am to see you.' Then, at Tara's expression: 'What -'

'Morag just saw us,' Jago explained. 'And her *expression* was quite plain.'

'Oh dear! Well, come in,' she led the way up the path. 'I'll have the tea made in a jiffy. You must be *frozen*. I've had the kettle simmering for hours—it's a wonder it's not boiled dry.'

It was wonderful to be in a warm, comfortable room again. Tara looked round, and caught Jago's eye, and she smiled, just a little.

'Do you mind?' he asked. They were alone. Lalla had gone off into the kitchen to do tea and toast.

'There's nothing we can do about it,' she answered. 'And if we tried to explain it would make it worse, I suppose.'

'Yes, it would,' he agreed. 'I couldn't care less for myself—but for you it's different, I know.' He scratched his cheek thoughtfully. 'I could strangle the woman sometimes—she knows everything about everybody on Gaela.'

'But not everything about you,' Tara said quietly. 'I—I won't say anything about the picture if you don't want me to.'

'Oh, that.' He shrugged. 'Thanks. It's not a dark secret or anything. I just prefer some things to be kept private—at the moment.' He had swung the rucksack to the floor, and bent now to lift out Tara's folded bag and flask. He put them on the chair and straightened up. 'Look, tell Lalla I won't stay. I need a shave and a wash—and I hope Fiona's at my house.'

'Do you want me to come ?' Tara asked.

He narrowed his eyes. 'This morning? Aren't you too tired?'

'No. I want to come, honestly. I want to help.'

He nodded. 'Then thanks. I'll away now. If she's not there I'll let you know straight away—and in any case don't hurry, you must have some food and a hot drink first. I'll see you.'

She went to the door with him, and as he was about to open the porch door she said: 'Jago?'

He turned slowly. 'Yes?'

'I—thank you for everything.'

He smiled slightly. 'It was a pleasure.' His eyes met hers, and that look was steady and disconcerting. 'I mean it—all of it.' Then he turned away and the door shut behind him, and Tara stood there for a few moments before going in the house again. She felt curiously lightheaded, almost dizzy, and she knew it was only partly caused by hunger.

She had time to think when she was sitting in Jago's home later. There was so much that had happened, so **Very** much to think about. And his house. It was the first time she had been in it. She sat quietly

in a corner of the living room, an open magazine on her knees, but not really reading. The room was warm and comfortable in a different way from Lalla's, the furniture older, skilfully chosen to blend with the old house, the red carpet warm underfoot, a perfect background to rich mahogany and rosewood. And the books were all around, hundreds of them. A fire burnt brightly in the hearth, lit by Morag, and Jago was the other side of the room with Fiona, playing with coloured cardboard shapes with her—only Tara knew it, wasn't playing at all, it was deadly serious. Morag had told Jago that Fiona had always had a woman with her wherever she went, and that was why he had asked her to be there, just quietly sitting—but available if needed. She was glad to help him, more glad than he would ever know— than she would ever tell.

Tara thought about him being related to the old Laird—and about his being a doctor. And she thought about other things more private and wonderful, and wondered if she was beginning—impossible as it seemed—to find herself falling in love with this big, strong, utterly *marvellous* man. She knew now instinctively why Fiona trusted him. More—Tara had seen a look almost of hope and love on the little girl's face, and her heart had skipped a beat.

He was infinitely patient but firm. Fiona had tantrums when something went wrong, but always he was in control—and that couldn't be easy, but he managed. Now Tara allowed herself the luxury of watching him, because he was too busy to look up, and it was something she wanted very much to do.

He had changed out of the mist-dampened sweater into another, white pullover. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and his arms were strong and muscular, darkly covered with hair. The gold watch on his left wrist made his arm look more tanned, and he was picking up a square of cardboard at that moment to hand to Fiona. As always the girl watched him, watched his face with that hungry intensity as if trying to understand him. If she was deaf, as he

thought, she lived in a completely enclosed world of her own, with absolutely no way of communicating at all, for a young child cannot learn if she cannot hear. Perhaps he was right. Tara fervently prayed so, clenching her hands tightly until the knuckles showed white. There was so much that could be done for her if so, he had told her when she had arrived half an hour previously. He had a friend in Edinburgh that he wanted Fiona to see, and was going to work on Morag and her family. Tara didn't doubt that he would get his own way eventually—she imagined that he usually did—and at that thought, most oddly, she felt her cheeks go warm. Why, she wondered, should she have a sudden memory of what had happened so few hours before? And that was followed by something else— the remembrance of when he had first woken and called her 'darling'—in sleep. Who was the woman he thought she had been?

'No, Fiona,' his voice disturbed her uncomfortable thoughts—and why *should* she mind, after all? But she did. 'Not that one.' He tilted Fiona's face up and held up a circle. 'See, this one.' And he nodded. Tara saw the girl's lips tighten rebelliously. That was a good sign. She had emotions—she could feel annoyed with him. He looked up quickly and winked at Tara as Fiona bent her head, after taking the circle from him. She smiled back, suddenly happy. It left her with a comfortable glow that lasted several minutes.

'Tara, will you make some coffee, please?' He was looking at her again, and she stood up.

'Yes, of course.' And she suddenly realized something. She was no longer conscious of the scar, or the limp. She had not once felt the need to turn her head a certain way, or disguise her walk, which had always been agony to do. It didn't *matter*—and she felt a heady sense—almost of freedom—as she went out to his kitchen. A man's kitchen—she gave a slight smile as she looked around her. Bare, no trimmings, no fancy mats or trays, just the essentials; coffee pot, beakers, oil lamp on top of a cupboard.

She looked about her as curious as any woman in another's kitchen, and with the perfectly valid reason that she had to find coffee and sugar and milk.

He was well stocked with tinned foods, and that was sensible. She admired his use of space, everything well planned, nothing wasted. But then she opened the wrong drawer when she was looking for spoons, and before she could close it she saw the photograph lying on odds and ends of broken gadgets, pens, a notebook—and men did keep things in odd places anyway. She should have shut the drawer, but she lifted out the photograph and looked at it. It was a snap of a couple on a beach; the man was Jago, and the girl was a foot shorter, dark-haired and beautiful, that much was obvious. They had both been swimming, and were laughing at something. Jago's arm was draped casually over her shoulders, and the girl was smiling straight at the camera as if to say: 'Look what I've got I' Was this her? The woman he dreamed about? Tara swallowed and felt faintly sick. And now she had to make coffee and take it in, and act normally—and she felt utterly wretched.

He looked at her when she carried the beakers in, and a frown creased his forehead. 'Anything wrong, Tara?'-

She managed a smile. 'Nothing. Just tired a bit.' The lie hurt, but the truth was even more painful. Nothing had changed, but she wanted to go back to her aunt's house. She didn't want to be here with him any more. She began to read the magazine, and had to concentrate hard to blot out a disturbing picture of what had so nearly happened at the Big House, and the sickness was now shame, and worse — humiliation.

When Morag came for her granddaughter he went to the door with Fiona, and Tara heard their voices for several minutes. She looked round, wishing that she could just slip out of the back door and go.

But he would probably come round to see why— and she didn't want *that.* So she waited, and the minute he walked in, she stood up.

'Morag's an obstinate old devil,' he began. 'Won't hear of anything to do with Edinburgh -' he stopped, and walked across the room to Tara. 'You look all in,' he said. 'Why don't you go home to bed?'

'Yes—yes, I will.' She was edging away as she spoke, and if he touched her she would scream. But he didn't. He cocked his head in that way he had, and asked quietly: 'What's wrong, Tara?'

'Nothing!' She gave him a tight, bright smile. 'Nothing at all! Why should there be ?'

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'But there is. Is it something to do with Fiona ?'

'Of course not!' That at least she could say with conviction. But if he asked any more questions . . . He was too clever by far. 'I must go— really. J-just let me know when Fiona's coming again, and I'll be here. Goodbye, Jago.'

He opened the door for her. 'Thanks, Tara. Goodbye.' And he gave her one of his searching looks, but he wasn't going to ask any more questions, she suddenly knew that.

She slipped round him and out, clutching her bag like a weapon, and she couldn't see the expression on his face, because she would not turn round, not for anything, and she would not have understood that look even if she had.

The less she saw of Jago in future, the better. That was the decision reached by Tara as she lay in bed that night. Because she knew now that it wouldn't take much for her to fall in love with him —and

wouldn't he find that amusing if he knew! Eventually she slept, and she wondered, just before sleep claimed her, how she would enjoy getting back to the typewriter and Damien Corbett in his hour of peril now. Not very oddly, it all seemed rather tame by comparison with all that had happened since she last touched the keys.

She didn't see Jago for several days, and the next time Morag was due she wondered if he would call in first, to make sure she was going. Lalla was too engrossed with the new novel to even know what day it was, and certainly hadn't noticed anything amiss, for which Tara was thankful. She had managed to immerse herself in her work, and put certain disquieting thoughts to the back of her mind. But the morning Morag was due, they all came rushing back, and she found herself waiting with clammy hands for the knock on the door that would tell her Morag had arrived.

When it came she opened tne porch door with a smile. 'Hello, Morag,' she greeted the small woman —and she couldn't help wondering what was in the other's mind as she returned the greeting with a knowing smile and the words: 'Himself is waiting for you next door.'

'Oh yes, I'll go now.'

'Miss Baxter, she will be at her writing now, I don't doubt?'

'Why, yes, Morag. Did you want her—is it urgent?'

Morag produced a crumpled envelope from the depths of her coat pocket. 'It can wait,' she admitted. 'It is the invitation for you both,' and she gave aft important nod.

'Oh, how very nice. Er—to what?' Tara hoped she didn't sound too foolish.

'To the wedding party on Saturday. Did she not tell you? Tsk! I'll away in and put this on the mantel. Aye, well, off you go now.'

Feeling dismissed, Tara went out along the path and knocked at Jago's front door.

'It's open—come in,' he called, and she pushed the door open, pausing to wipe her feet on the mat in the porch. There were fishing rods there, and she wondered when he went. Then the inner door opened, and Jago stood framed in the doorway, dressed in his jeans and black polo-necked sweater.

'Hello, Tara. Come in and sit down. How are you?'

'Fine, thanks.' It was like talking to a stranger. She had managed to put him out of her mind; it hurt less that way, the nagging ache that she could only think was jealousy. Absurd, because she had come up here to try and heal a broken heart, and it was no use going home with another one. So she forced a smile for him, and the girl who sat patiently at the table, her hands folded in her lap. Waiting, eyes only for Jago, for him to bring her to life for a few short hours.

'Good. I'm going to draw with Fiona today. She's got some talent. I sent those sketches of hers off to a friend in Edinburgh, and he's impressed. They're nearly normal for a girl her age—and considering all the terrific drawbacks, *that* says a lot.'

He went back to the girl, and Tara saw the papers and crayons spread out before going to her chair by the fire. She had brought a manuscript to read. It was better than looking at him. An hour passed, then she looked up and said: 'Shall I get coffee?'

He didn't look up. Too intent on what the little girl was doing. 'Please.'

She didn't want to, but she had to. She opened the drawer, and the photograph had gone. Tara made coffee and took it back. Orange juice for Fiona, and biscuits on a plate, and her mouth was dry.

When Morag came, Jago took Fiona out, then came back into the room. Tara reached for her bag and he said: 'Wait a minute.'

She stood still. 'Yes?'

He ran his fingers through his hair. 'I don't know how to put this,' and for a moment he looked almost embarrassed, which was very surprising. Then he walked over to stand in front of her. 'I heard you open the drawer again, so I know. Did you—find a photograph last time you were here ?'

Tara stiffened and fought desperately for calm. Was he going to humiliate her now? 'Yes,' she said. 'I wasn't trying to pry—I opened the wrong drawer when I was looking for spoons. W-why?'

He smiled. 'I thought—look, Tara, I don't know whether you're interested—but that woman in the photograph is my sister. Her husband took the photograph.'-

The shock was so great that she felt the colour drain from her face. He went on: 'I just thought I'd tell you.'

'Is that all?' She couldn't take it all in yet— couldn't take in his reasons for *wanting* her to know.

He nodded, and brought his hands forward to take hold of her arms. 'Listen,' he said, in a very strange sort of voice. 'Am I being conceited in thinking—it mattered to you, that snap ?'

She couldn't answer, she just shook her head wordlessly, and Jago pulled her gently—very gently, towards him, and kissed her. Then he looked down at her, and his smile was everything it should be.

'You were jealous—of a photograph?'

'Yes.' She blinked several times quickly, for it would be ridiculous to cry.

'You little idiot,' he said very softly, and hugged her. Tara put her arms up and round him, because that was where they wanted to be, and they stayed like that until he whispered: 'Morag's eyes would fall out if she saw us now. We'd have to get married!'

That reminded Tara of the invitation—and there was also a crumpled-looking envelope on his mantelpiece.. She looked at it, then at him. 'Have you been invited to this wedding party on Saturday?'

'The *ceilidh* in the evening? Yes. And you? Good. I haven't even read it yet. Let's see—' he reached across and opened the envelope to produce a postcard, handwritten in neat but childish letters. Then he handed it to Tara. 'Looks like another of her brood getting hitched. She's got eight or nine children scattered all over the Highlands and Hebrides. Should be a good do. The drink flows freely, from what I recall. They don't give you much time to buy presents, do they?' He flung the card and envelope on the table. 'I'll get the ferry to the mainland tomorrow and have a look round. Want to come?'

'Yes, please,' Tara answered promptly.

'All right. Ready at eight? We'll catch the nine a.m. ferry, and spend all day there—unless the weather's too bad, of course.'

'Ready at eight,' she agreed happily. The world was a brighter place. Brighter and absolutely *wonderful.*

She had to leave soon after, determined to do extra typing so that she wouldn't get behind with it. She knew Lalla wouldn't mind her taking

a day off, and might even be glad at having the worry of a present taken off her hands.

Tara went to bed that night looking forward to the following day's outing with a sense of joy. She was not to know then of the discovery that day would lead to; a discovery that would change her life.

The day was everything it should be. The sun shone, the puddles in the road had dried by morning so that they were both able to wear shoes instead of Wellingtons for their walk down to the ferry. Jago put his arm round Tara as they walked along. Both were macs—almost essential, and it would certainly be tempting fate if you didn't, especially in early February. But the sun shone, and the sky was of palest washed blue, tinglingly cold, the air as fresh as mint, the road underfoot fairly smooth. Jago jingled coins in his pocket. 'Brought your money?' he asked.

'Mmm, yes. Why?'

'Wondered. Thought you might treat me to lunch,' and she looked quickly at him, and saw that he was joking, and laughed.

'I don't believe in paying for men,' she said, trying to sound prim.

He pulled a face. 'Pity! And I thought you were an ardent women's-libber, the way you refused my offer of a drink that night in Kirkgarron.'

'Oh! *That* night.' She smiled at him. 'I didn't know you then.'

'Didn't like me either,' he grinned. 'And I didn't half fancy you.'

She wondered if she was going pink, and moved uneasily in his grasp. 'Don't joke,' she said faintly.

'I'm not,' he sounded surprised, even faintly indignant. 'Don't you know it's a challenge to a man if he thinks a woman doesn't like him? Especially if he doesn't know why, and can't see a reason. It put me on my mettle.'

'Is that why you kissed me on the ferry?' she demanded.

He began to laugh. 'Partly! I wanted to see what you would do.'

She was to remember those words later, and would know the truth. But not then—not yet.

'And you did,' she answered. 'You found out.'

'Yes,' he rubbed his cheek reflectively. 'I miscalculated somewhat. You certainly pack a wallop for such a gentle-looking creature. You know something? You're only the second woman who's ever hit me!'

'Oh! And what was the other one for?' she turned wide eyes to him.

'Ah—better not. Not now. Perhaps one day when I know you better.' It was all so lighthearted, and it set the mood for their journey across the water to Kirkgarron, where they took a bus ride to a larger fishing village and looked round shops, and bought their presents before having a late lunch at a cosy pub. Afterwards they left the parcels at the bus depot, and walked along the shingly beach and threw pebbles into the sea, and fed the gulls with biscuits while the breeze tugged at their hair and stung their cheeks. And everything was so perfect and beautiful that Tara wondered if it could last.

Eventually they caught the bus back to Kirkgarron, then the ferry, and in that tiny cabin, with just the two of them and two parcels of towels and bedding beside them, Tara fell asleep leaning on Jago's shoulder, while he sat still with his arms steady and firm around her,

and breathed in the faint sea- washed scent of her hair, and he would not have disturbed her for. anything.

They reached his house, and he said: 'Come on in and have a drink. Lalla won't have missed you yet—she'll still be writing.'

It was gone seven, and dark, and the stars shone faintly in a cloudy sky, and kept vanishing. 'All right,' Tara agreed. 'Just for a few minutes.'

He lit the oil lamps, and Tara was surprised at how well two of them lighted the room, and said so.

He grinned as he carried in an oil stove and lit it. 'I don't want electricity here,' he answered. 'The place has got a life of its own with these lamps—and I can read by them as well as anything else. Sit down, Tara, I'll make coffee, and we'll have something a bit stronger with it.' He took her coat and hung it on a chair. 'Have a look at a book or something while I'm in the kitchen.'

She sat in the chair beside a lamp on the sideboard and looked along the bookshelves beside her.

As she lifted out a book, a small brown folder fell out from where it had been wedged on the shelf, and as she bent to pick it up, several loose sheets fluttered to the floor. She could hear the distant clatter of cups from the kitchen, the sound of a drawer opening—and smiled to herself. The sheets were covered with handwriting, bold and upright, and she knew without being told that it was Jago's. And however hard you try, it is impossible not to just *glance* at the first few words of anything. So it was unfortunate that those on the sheet she picked up should be what they were. So inescapably meaning only one thing ... 'and the bitterness is mainly caused by the sense of rejection by fiance—possibly much more than by facial scar—slight anyway (cosmetic surgery possible? Check). Not sure re leg. Could be

psychosomatic -' By then Tara could not have stopped reading if she had wanted, to. For she knew, with a sick, *certain* knowledge, that every word referred to her. She went on reading the awful, terrible words—and it was horrible, seeing everything set out in a clinical way, even if sometimes she didn't understand what all the words meant. Then with shaking fingers she put the sheets in order and began to read everything from the beginning—and J ago came in. He was about to say something—then he saw Tara's face. He put the two beakers down on the table and crossed to her. Then he saw the folder —and she saw the colour leave his face.

'Dear God,' he said quietly. 'I thought I'd burnt it.'

Tara stood up slowly, every limb aching and trembling. 'What are you?' she asked. 'I know what I am now. I'm a specimen in a laboratory to be analysed—b-but what are *you*? You're not a teacher or a doctor—not with those notes.' And the hurt was so deep that she could hardly speak. She had to force the words out, and she found the strength from somewhere, because she had to know.

'Tara, give them to me. I -'

She snatched them away. 'No. I'm going to read them properly.' She hugged the folder against her. 'Answer me!'

'It was only at first—those first few days, I had to--'

'What are you ? A psychiatrist ?'

'Yes.'

She took a long deep shuddering breath. 'I knew, I should have known. Shouldn't I?' The tears glistened and fell down her cheeks. 'I should have guessed—that remote look you had sometimes—and I-—I thought then there was something, but I didn't know you'd go so

far—when—when you tried to make love to me at the Big House -' she saw him close his eyes, saw the drawn harshness of his face, and something inside her cried out. 'Was that an experiment too? Was it?'

'No. You know—by then I knew you, knew what I felt about you -'

'You liar!' her voice had gone lower, more intense. 'How dare you lie now! That's why you kissed me on the boat too—and is it all here in the notes? *All* of it?' She had to press her hand to her mouth to hold back the sobs, and Jago took sudden hold of her.

'Tara, don't. Tara darling, listen to me now. I'll tell -'

'No! Don't touch me -' His hands burned like fire through the sweater she wore, and she wished she were stronger, much stronger, because she wanted to hurt him badly, like he had hurt her, and she wasn't going to listen to him either. 'Take your hands off me!' She wrenched herself free and the folder fell to the floor, all the notes fluttering out like grotesque confetti:

'It's all here, isn't it?' she said.-'Every detail about me, and how I look and act. You can keep them, those words on paper, and study them-1 don't want to see them now—not now:'

'Don't you think you should listen to me for a minute?' he asked her, and she saw him as she had never seen him before. Saw him and hated every inch of him.

'While you tell me more lies?' she shot back. 'No. First you're a teacher, then a doctor, then a relative of the Laird—now this -' she kicked the papers contemptuously. 'I've had enough of them. Put them in a book. You should be good at that.'

'I've never lied to you—ever,' he said. 'Nor will I now. All I told you is true. It's up to you whether you believe me or not. Your aunt told

me about you before Christmas. I knew at Kirkgarron who you were. That's not why I came back—but when I realized it was you, I wanted to help you—isn't it instinctive to want to help others? And I did, didn't I? You no longer hide your face or feel self-conscious about your leg -'

'Shut up!' She caught him a stinging backhanded blow across the mouth with her right hand. 'I won't listen. I *hate* you!'

'If it makes you feel any better, go ahead, hit me.' The mark showed; she had caught him with the ring she wore on her hand, and blood glistened on his lip. But she didn't want to touch him again. She shuddered. 'And let you feel you've "helped" me?' she jeered. 'Then you can put it in your notes -' and suddenly she was too overwhelmed to say more. It went over her in huge waves of realization. And she bent her head and covered her face with her hands. Stumbling, blindly, she went to the door and out. And she never turned, never looked back.

By the time Saturday came, Tara was composed, normal—on the outside at any rate. She had had to tell Lalla a little of what had happened, if only to explain her sudden reversal—and also her white face and shadowed eyes. Lalla had listened, as always, and gone to see Jago afterwards. But Tara refused to let her speak of him—and Lalla wisely kept her own opinion of the matter to herself. She grieved for her niece—and too for the man next door, the strong, kind man she knew well enough to realize that the last thing he ever wanted was to hurt Tara.

The wedding was Saturday afternoon on the mainland, and only the close family were going, for the ferry held a limited number, and the whole island was going to the *ceilidh* in the evening.

Tara knew Jago was going, and had told Lalla at first that she would stay at home—until Lalla had answered that in that case, so would she!

On Saturday, they were talking, and Lalla said: 'Morag was telling me before about a man who's going to this party, by the name of Ruari Mhor— fascinating name—a red-haired giant of a man from what I can gather. In the Merchant Navy, comes home about twice a year, and creates havoc.'

'In what way?' Despite herself, Tara was intrigued. After the sense of being betrayed, *used* by Jago, she had thought that nothing could matter any more. She had cried that night, cried after the perfection of a wonderful day had been ruined by the discovery that she was not, and never had been, anything but a case history to him—another Fiona, in fact. But the hurt was more bitter because with Fiona he didn't pretend anything; with her he was genuine. With Tara he had gone so much deeper, feigned affection, and more, let her think . . . She had stopped. What had he led her to think? Why, that he was falling in love with her. How cruel, how unutterably cruel! She determined, there and then as she sat with Lalla in the warm sitting room, that she would let him see that it hadn't worked—that she didn't care. Only then would she ever be able to holct her head up in front of him. Perhaps in a way it would be a good thing for her to go to the party. Running away was no good. She had done enough of that, and now she would grow up and be a woman, with no regrets for what was irretrievably past.

'Well, dear,' Lalla had that look on her face that Tara knew of old—the expression she wore when another character was about to be found for a book, 'he's quite a one for the girls apparently—and they for him, and he's a fighter too—and you know what Gaels are like when they've had a few drinks.'

'Yes, I remember.' Tara managed to laugh now, and with it came relief. 'You've told me often enough. 'Oh, Lalla, of course I'll go this evening— and don't worry about Jago. I'll even speak to him, then he'll see I don't care.' And she-took a deep breath.

Lalla looked faintly alarmed. 'Are you sure?' she said. 'You don't want to overdo it. I mean- -'

'I know,' Tara nodded, calmer now with the resolution. 'Don't worry. I've got to do it for my own peace of mind. *You've* helped me a lot. Perhaps in a way he—Jago—has too. I'm not going to undo all that now. I've had a few days to think, and now I've decided.' And she smiled at the older woman, who stood up and touched Tara's shoulder.

'I'll go and make us coffee,' she said. 'I asked Morag to order me the taxi so we wouldn't have to walk to the village tonight. I took a chance, for I guessed somehow we'd be going—and I'm so glad, Tara—glad you're being sensible. You're doing the right thing, I know.' And she smiled and went out, and didn't see the fleeting look of pain that crossed Tara's face.

They were ready at seven, and Tara stood in front of the mirror in the living room putting the finishing touches to her lipstick. Lalla looked at her, affection creasing her face. 'Er—Tara,' she began. Tara looked round quickly.

'What is it, Lalla?'

'Well, as you're—er—going to speak to Jago, would it be all right if I told him he could share the taxi?'

Tara shrugged. 'Of course.' But when the older woman had gone out she bit her lip, faint butterflies of apprehension hovering about. Would she be abl to bear it—bear *him* being close? She would have to, and perhaps it would be a good test before the evening itself.

She stood back from the mirror and surveyed herself-critically. She wore a floor-length dress in deep red flowered courtelle, with a V-neck. It had been her favourite, months ago—but this was the first time she had worn it since the accident. Nervously she smoothed her skirt. It brought back memories, but the self-consciousness was momentary. She lifted her head high and smiled at her reflection. She had *known* she looked good in it before—she looked good in it again—she *did.* Her soft blonde hair curled gently forward, and her cheeks had filled out slightly, because here she was always hungry, and she looked beautiful and desirable and utterly feminine.

She stiffened slightly as she heard the porch, door open, then Lalla came in—and Jago was with her. Swallowing hard, Tara looked at him.

'Hello, Tara,' he said.

For a moment she thought she wouldn't be able to answer, her throat had tightened so. Then she managed. 'Hello,' she answered. 'Excuse me,' and she swept out of the room and ran upstairs for her coat. Her heartbeat was rapid, but she had got it over—the first awful moment, and she knew she would cope now.

She went to the bathroom window, at the front of the house, and looked out to see if she could see a. car's headlights. The sea glinted in the moonlight, and the distant mountains were harsh black x>ut-lines against a starry sky. It was all so beautiful, but she couldn't stay here looking at it, she must go down and let him know that he couldn't hurt her any more. She flicked her hair back and set off

downstairs with her coat over her arm—the dark blue coat she had worn on the day she had first met Jago.

He was standing by the fireplace with a glass in his hand, a cigarette in his mouth. He wore a tweed jacket and fine grey worsted trousers, and a white toll-necked sweater, and he looked startlingly attractive. Lalla was nowhere to be seen and Tara swallowed a momentary panic. She dropped her coat over a chair and went over to the window. She could see his reflection in the darkened glass and he hadn't moved, hadn't turned to watch her.

Then he spoke: 'Fiona's coming on Monday with Morag. She won't let me teach her without a woman being there. Will you come or not?' She saw him turn slightly, but she didn't look round.

'I want to help Fiona,' she answered. 'Yes. As long as I can read,' and she didn't need to add: 'for I don't want to talk to you.'

'Thank you.' He swallowed the last of his drink and flung his cigarette in the fire. Tara turned, round.

'Where's Lalla?' she asked.

'In the kitchen making coffee.' She saw the healed scab on his lip, saw too the shadows under his eyes as though he slept badly, and she hoped it was so.

'Oh,' and she smiled very faintly to herself.

Lalla brought in coffee, which they drank, and when they had finished, the car honked outside, so Lalla switched off the lights and they went out into the crisp darkness, Jago carrying the two parcels which Hamish took and flung in the front seat. Tara got in first because she wasn't going to sit next to *him*, and then they were on their way.

The party was being held at the island's only pub, because' it was the one place big enough to accommodate Gaela's seventy-odd inhabitants. There was noise already. The music had begun, and everybody was there, so that heads turned to watch them go in, followed by Hamish, also a guest. Tara knew without being told that she and Jago were a cause for speculation. It was something in the air, in the discreetly warm smiles they were given as Lalla greeted everyone. If only they knew the truth, thought Tara. How ironic—no doubt the whole place assumed they were lovers. She wondered if Jago was aware of it—but he wouldn't care anyway. As she smiled in answer to a greeting from an elderly lady who looked remarkably like Morag, she thought suddenly: He doesn't really *care* about anything. Everything is logical and emotionless, able to be reduced to a formula on paper to him. Perhaps it's part of his job, being like that-^not getting involved—ever. She watched him discreetly as Morag introduced him to the bride and groom. He stood there talking to them, perfectly at ease, a tall attractive man who was even now being eyed by several girls who stood in a giggling bunch by the jukebox in the corner of the large room. Tara's heart did a funny flip, and she didn't know why.

Then she saw the big man who stood by the bar, a pint glass in his hand, frankly appraising her, and she felt herself go warm, as warm as the red hair he flaunted. Ruari Mhor—it could be no other—and she knew what Lalla meant about him having an eye for women. He lifted his glass to his mouth, and his eyes narrowed—and Tara turned away.

Morag came up, the crowd settled and swirled, the jukebox began blaring again, and Tara and Lalla went to meet the shy couple who looked as if they wanted nothing so much as to get away.

There was dancing, and drinking, and Jago bought them both whiskies, then they trooped into a side room to see the presents, and after that, in a Paul Jones, Tara found herself being partnered briefly

by the red-haired man. It hadn't been her imagination before. It was there all right, the awareness, and in the way he held her during that brief encounter. Tara didn't like him—she was instinctively frightened of him, but at the same time it was somehow nice to know that she wasn't completely devoid of attraction. The evening passed, and the room grew warmer, and the air more alcohol- and smoke-filled. Jago was enjoying himself, or appeared to be, as much as he ever could, she thought. For wasn't everything, all human behaviour, just a lot of statistics to him?

Ruari Mhor got Tara in a corner during a particularly hectic dance, and with his arm, held her prisoner.

'Let's away outside for a wee while,' he said thickly. He had been drinking, and Tara hadn't missed the wary glances from other men, nor Morag's tightly disapproving look when he had stumbled and sent glasses flying once. They knew him ol old, and people were used to him, but all the same, if only he'd come a week later! Tara could almost read Morag's mind.

Jago, rather busy dancing with a pretty girl who wore too much make-up, seemed completely unconcerned with anything Tara did. Some part of her wanted to cry out to him: 'Look, someone thinks I'm attractive—a real man, not a head-shrinker.'

She smiled and laughed, and perhaps she was having a good time after all. Her first Highland wedding! Not what she had expected, but interesting all the same to tell her mother and father about when she wrote.

But even she couldn't imagine what was to come later, something that would shift the balance of events yet again, and quite irrevocably.

Lalla was busy talking to some of Morag's relatives in a corner. She had her 'writer's' face on— although she appeared to be listening intently, was nodding in all the right places, Tara knew her mind was really miles away, shaping and forming a character for her book—and she sensed too that it was Ruari, who had clearly decided that Tara found him irresistible—and would not accept her refusals to take a wee walk outside.

Then at one point Tara knew she had to get away for a brief while—alone. The smoky air pricked her eyes, and her head was reeling with unaccustomed drink. Jago had vanished and her lips tightened. Was he with a girl? She didn't care, she really didn't, but she didn't want to bump into them either.

Tara slipped on her warm stole and walked quietly outside. The cold air hit her with its icy needles and she shivered, pulling the stole more closely round her. It was a clear bright night, and she was going to walk across the paved yard as far as the wall, look over it, and return. Her head throbbed and she put a hand to her forehead. What was the use? It was an ordeal, this evening—but she was determined to stick it out until -

'So you came after all.' Ruari's voice came from, behind her, and she whirled round, startled, to be held by a pair of hard arms.

'Oh, Ruari! You frightened me!' It took her a few moments to gather breath. She didn't want to be out here with him—and there was no one else about, though the windows of the pub shook with the noise from within.

She tried to move away, but he held her, laughing. 'Ah, come on, you're a fine bonny lass. Don't go all coy on me now.' His beer- and whisky-laden breath was on her face as he lunged at her and kissed her hard. Her arms were too tightly held, so she kicked his shin.

'Let me go!'

'Ow! What you wanna do that for?' This, clearly, had never happened to him before. He bent to rub his leg and Tara twisted away—but not fast enough. One long sinewy arm came out and grabbed her. 'Hold it, little spitfire. Nobody kicks *me* an' gets away wi' it.' And then Tara saw the tall dark shape looming up from somewhere near the pub and heard—oh, blessed relief—Jago's voice.

'All right, you heard the lady.'

Ruari released her to swing round, and saw Jago. He laughed. 'Ach, *you*. What do you want, Sassenach? Do you not know where you're not wanted?'

'Do you want me to go, Tara?' Jago asked.

'No!' She hadn't intended it to come out so sharply. 'No,' she repeated. 'I—I only came out for some fresh air. I want t-to go back now.' She didn't care if it was Jago, she wasn't staying here with this drunken redhead, who was making her more nervous by the minute.

'Right. Come on, I'll take you in,' said Jago, and reached out his arm. Ruari struck it away, and in a brief, unprintable two-word epithet, told Jago to leave. The lamp at the edge of the car park cast a dim enough light, but Tara saw Jago's face change, heard his indrawn breath, and a strange excitement filled her.

'I don't like your language,' he said—and his voice wasn't raised. 'Not in front of a woman. Tara go on. I'll follow.'

'Like hell you will -' and Tara heard a stream of Gaelic. She didn't know the language, but he wasn't commenting on the weather, that was certain. She began to move away slightly, because instinct told

her what was about to happen, and this strange excitement pulsated inside her—she didn't want the men to fight—and yet-—and yet -'

And then, most astoundingly, she heard Jago re- ply—*in the same tongue*—and it shook Ruari, she could tell, for he peered more closely at Jago as he muttered: 'Who the hell *are* you ?'

And Tara noticed two things at practically the same moment. Both men were the same height— and the pub had gone deathly quiet—with faces at the window now; eager peering faces, and she could sense the excitement from here.

Ruari lashed out with his right arm in a blow that would have felled a tree—but Jago moved quicker than the red-haired man, and went in swiftly, caught Ruari once, twice, under his chin, rocking him.

Groggily, vile-tempered now, Ruari shouted: 'Right, boyo, that does it. You -' But that next word was lost as his head cracked back and he went sprawling untidily to the ground. Tara was rooted to the spot in horror. This was horrible, awful, and yet,.. There was something fascinating in the sight of Jago, calm, *impersonal* Jago, who never got annoyed or lost his temper, reaching down to yank a half-conscious red-haired giant to his feet—and Ruari hadn't once hit him. It had all been over in minutes.

Noise broke out, and then footsteps were coming nearer, and voices were raised in excitement' as everyone began to discuss what had just happened— and she watched—and suddenly felt sick, and turned away to lean on the low wall, and stare blankly ahead at dark shadows on the hills. She was trembling with reaction, and put her hand to her mouth. If only she hadn't come out... If only ... Too late for that. She started violently at the touch on her arm and-turned to see Morag.

'Oh, Morag!' She wanted to burst into tears. 'I'm—I'm sorry -' she began.

'Sorry! Ach, what is it? By God, he's a bonny wee fighter, yon man of yours. Best entertainment I ever —ach, an' we never knew I'

'You're not mad?' gasped Tara. 'It's ruined-your party -'

'No! Away wi' ye. Can't we always expect a wee brawl or two, especially at a wedding—an' no one's ever seen Ruari Mhor off his feet before.' She patted Tara's arm briskly. 'T'will give us something to talk about for a while. Aye, and mebbe that red- haired braggart will not be so keen to boast in future. Come away in, girl, you're shivering . . .' And she led Tara back inside.

It was past eleven, and the party was beginning to break up. Perhaps that had been the climax, thought Tara, seeing the islanders donning coats, saying their goodnights, going over to speak to Jago—who, she suddenly realized, seemed to be the hero of the hour.

There wasn't a mark on him. There wouldn't be, she thought wryly, and was suddenly sobered to think that the fight had been over *her*. The least she could do was to thank him. But she didn't want to. She would have to force it.

Half an hour later they were walking home. Lalla had been one of the audience at the window, and was bursting to talk about the incident, but in view of the constrained atmosphere between Tara and Jago, had to content herself with comments about the reception, and the buffet supper they had eaten earlier.

The moon shone light and cold over the mountains, and Tara shivered, thrusting her hands deep in her pockets. Reaction had set in, and she felt wretched now, and very tired. Jago and Lalla talked, but she didn't take anything in. She wanted to go to bed.

Lalla asked Jago in for coffee when at last they reached the house. Tara knew he was about to refuse, and said quickly: 'I'm going straight to bed— so feel free.'

'All right, thanks.' He looked at Lalla, and Tara caught the glance, but didn't understand it, for there was something there . .. She would later, but not now.

As soon as they were inside, Tara kissed Lalla. 'Good night, love. You don't mind?'

Lalla winked at her. 'Of course not. Shall I bring you up a drink?'

'No, thanks, I'm dead tired.' She turned to go out, and Jago said: 'Good night, Tara.'

She faltered in her steps, but just for a second. 'Good night.' She couldn't say his name, not for anything. She had no intention of ever saying it again.

CHAPTER SIX

THE next day they slept late, and when eventually she woke>Tara felt better than she had for days. She slipped on her dressing gown and went downstairs to make tea for them both. She remembered, as the kettle boiled, that she had heard both Lalla's and Jago's voices for what seemed like ages before she eventually fell asleep, and wondered what they had found to talk about for so long. Not that it mattered. She really didn't care. But she found out, partly anyway, when she took in the cup of tea to Lalla, who was still in bed.

Her aunt stretched and yawned. 'Oh, my dear, how nice. Put it down there—that's it. Mmm, lovely,' she struggled up and reached for her wrap. 'Sit down on the bed. I've got something to tell you.'

Tara obediently sat. 'What is it?' and she expected something about the party.

'Morag's told Jago he can take Fiona to Edinburgh to see his specialist friend!'

'What! Oh, that's wonderful. How did it happen?'

'Because of the fight, apparently! Morag was very impressed by a man who could actually put Ruari out—and had a quick rethink and a chat with her son, who was at the reception, though I don't remember which one he was -'

'Yes—and when's he taking her?'

'Well,' and Lalla gave Tara a look that should have *warned* her. 'Well, this is the awkward bit. Obviously she's got to have someone—a woman—

with her—and -' she stopped.

Tara stood up. 'No,' she said. 'Oh, no!'

'And Morag says,' Lalla ignored the outburst, 'that it can only be you, for Fiona likes you, and--'

'No,' Tara went to the window in great agitation. She turned round. 'Lalla, you know I can't, not after what's happened -'

'I know, dear. So does Jago, believe me. We spent hours going over it last night, and it puts him in a very awkward spot, for she needs to see this specialist soon—each week's delay could affect her eventual treatment -'

'Stop it!' said Tara weakly. *'Please.* Let me think.' She put her hands to her face, but she knew, she already *knew,* that she really had no choice, no choice at all.

She turned to Lalla. 'I want to speak to—to him,' she said. 'Will he be up?' Lalla nodded.

'Yes, I think so. Are you going now?'

Tara looked down at her dressing gown and smiled faintly. 'Not like this. I'll get dressed.' And with a last look at Lalla, she left the room.

She knocked at his door. Because there was something else nagging at the back of her mind, and she had to have an answer to it, and it couldn't wait.

He galled out: 'Come in,' and she hesitated, then slowly opened the door and entered. The living room was empty, but sounds came from the kitchen. 'Won't be a minute -' then she heard his footsteps, heard him begin: 'Did you tell -' and he came in and stopped. 'Oh, it's you. Good morning.'

'Yes, she told me about Edinburgh. Tell me, is it one of your plots?'

Jago looked at her. He wore a brown dressing gown over blue pyjamas, and was barefooted. His hair was untidy and he needed a shave, and perhaps he intended having one after he had drunk the tea he held. 'I don't follow,' he said. 'Do you want tea?'

Wo, thanks. This trip to Edinburgh that I have to go on—is it so that you can have *me* discreetly examined as well by another of your *friends?'*

There was a slight tightening of that dark jaw. 'What do you think I am ?' he asked quietly.

'I *know* what you are—I just want an answer.'

'Of course not. Morag told me last night that I can take Fiona. It's as simple as that. There's no one else I can ask to go—besides, the girl likes you—you know that, so does Morag. I want to go soon, before they change their mind. This week. I'll phone my friend today from the village. I tried to phone him last night from the pub after she'd given me the go- ahead, but he was out. That's how keen I am. It has nothing to do with you except purely as a chaperone for her.'

'I don't want to—I don't need to tell you why— but for Fiona's sake, I'll do it.' Tara turned away. 'I'm going now. You'd better let me know what day we'll be going and I'll get some things ready. How— how long will we be away?'

'Two nights.'

'Right, I'll tell Lalla. Goodbye.' She opened the door before he could move to do it, and went out. She was committed now, but she still didn't trust him, not at all.

It all happened so quickly. That evening, Jago came to the house while Tara was listening to a radio play. Lalla had gone upstairs to make a few notes about 'Red Ruari' as she had christened him. The soft strains of the play's closing music filled the room as the rap came on the door, and she went to open it.

Jago stood in the porch, and it was so dark she could scarcely see him. She took a deep breath. 'Do you want Lalla? She's writing -'

'No. I've just phoned. We can go tomorrow. Can you do it?'

'I——' she hadn't intended to ask him in, but the surprise took her breath away. She backed slightly. 'You'd better come in—it's a bit sudden --'

He pulled off the hood of his anorak as he came in, but made no move to unzip the coat itself, as if he knew he wasn't going to stay. 'I've just come from Morag's now. They're packing some clothes for her, and they'll have her ready at nine.'

'Then I'll be ready too. When? Eight?'

'If you will.' He had a very steady gaze, but it was like a stranger's, quite indifferent. She thought— not like last night. He came to life then, just for those few minutes of the fight—and he was a real man, tough and aggressive. 'Take some warm clothes. It's freezing cold in Edinburgh.'

'All right. Where will we be staying?' She hadn't intended to ask, but his mention of clothes made her wonder.

'That's all taken care of. Well, I'll go -'

'Just one more thing. How much money will I need?'

He had half turned. Now he slowly came back. 'What for?' -

'Everything. Fares, accommodation, meals. Just to 'give me an idea.'

He waited until she had finished, and a flicker of something touched his eyes, but she couldn't read what it was. 'I shouldn't worry about that -'

'I'm not letting *you* pay for me,' she said, quite clearly and pleasantly, but there was cool determination as well. 'I'll pay my own way. Fiona———-' she shrugged, 'she's different. That's your business. But not me.'

He inclined his head slightly. 'As you wish. But to save time, I suggest I let you know what you owe when we return.'

Tara nodded. 'All right. Is that all?'

'Yes. I'm going.'

There was something else she had to say and it might as well be now. And if it came out reluctantly, she didn't care. 'Thank you for g-getting rid of Ruari last night.'

He paused with his hand on the door. 'That's quite all right. I wasn't sure at first if I was interfering or not.'

She swallowed. 'No. No, you weren't. I would have managed to—to push him off eventually, but— well—'

'Would you?' There was the slightest trace of a smile at his mouth, but it didn't reach his eyes. 'You might have had a few shocks first. Some men don't like having to take no for an answer. Good night.' And he was gone, shutting the door silently behind him. Tara stood there, seething. Just for a moment, there had been a thin thread of arrogance in his tone—and she hadn't liked it. She took a deep breath and went to pack some clothes.

The train lulled Fiona to sleep soon after they left Kirkgarron. There was no direct route to Edinburgh, and they were to change at Inverness, but not for two hours. The coach was an open one, with tables, and Tara sat next to Fiona with Jago opposite, his long legs slantwise under the table. Rain slanted down outside, and Tara looked out of the window, seeing the mountains pass them in a wet blur, grey and cold-looking. They were the only ones in the carriage, as it rocked along the rails, and she was carefully avoiding Jago's eye. Not, she had to admit, that he was making any great effort to look at her. He was at that moment busily engaged on the *Times* crossword, and Tara had an open magazine before her, which she kept trying to read. They would arrive in Edinburgh late afternoon, and then what? She didn't know, she didn't like to ask, but she was also sure that he would have everything planned to the last detail. She glanced at the sleeping girl beside her and her mouth softened. Poor little lamb! Did she guess what was being done for her? Did she wonder where she was being taken to, with two comparative strangers? If she did, she had showed no outward .signs of apprehension when Jago and Tara had called to the small whitewashed house where she lived. She had gone immediately and trustingly, to Jago and put her hand in his, and - Tara had seen Fiona's mother bite her lip and turn away, distress on her pleasant features.

Within minutes they had been on the ferry, within a half hour on the train, and now, with the miles speeding past, Fiona would soon be further away from her home than she had ever been before.'

Suddenly Tara wanted to speak to Jago—wanted to tell him how much she knew he was doing for this child. But she could not. The barriers were too great now ever to be surmounted. They were invisible, yet as strong as any steel walls, stronger, for there could be no gate made, no way through, ever. Tara had made up her mind to

that, and nothing would ever lessen the pain and shock she had had that night, so recently, when she had discovered that she was merely a human guinea-pig to the man who now sat opposite. He knew, that was sure, and his apparent indifference only seemed to confirm her certainty. Odd, even so, that he should remain courteous. His manners could not be faulted, Tara had to admit. Opening doors, carrying her case, and Fiona's pathetically small carrier bag, helping them on and off the ferry—none of it seemed forced, but came naturally to him, and it was a point, however slight, in his favour.

'Do you want a cigarette, Tara?'

'No, thank you.'

'Do you mind if I smoke?'

'No, of course not.' Perhaps he had read her thoughts. She nearly smiled at *that* thought, and it seemed his glance rested briefly on her face, so she composed her features and looked down at the magazine quickly. She closed her eyes, wishing for strength to get through the ordeal of the next two days. If he stayed like this, it would be all right, but if he tried to talk to her . . . She turned and looked out of the window, seeing nothing but a grey drizzly blur. He wouldn't—Would he? Would he? Tara ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips, and heard him say: 'Do you want a drink ?'

'What? Oh, no, thanks. Not yet. W-when we arrive in Inverness. How long have we got to wait for the connection?'

'About twenty minutes. Plenty of time.'

Then there was silence again, because there was nothing more to say. The train went its unstoppable way, and Tara dozed lightly after a while, and had strange dreams.

After the quiet of Gaela, Edinburgh seemed enormously loud. The noise could not affect Fiona, but she stared around her wide-eyed and apprehensive as they went out into the bitter cold of a February day, and she held tightly to both Tara and Jago. The coat she wore was not really thick enough, but Tara knew she wore two pullovers underneath, a fact she had discovered when she had taken her to the toilet.

Jago hailed a taxi, they got in, and were off. Fiona sat with her eyes glued to the window, Tara closely beside her to avoid contact with the man leaning forward to direct the driver.

The journey was long, and Edinburgh was a grey, beautiful city, full of trees and -small parks, and Tara began to relax. What would the hotel be like? Clearly not one of the major ones, for they were on and around Princes Street, and that was a relief.

But when the taxi stopped, it was outside a terrace of imposing double-fronted Victorian houses, all with several bells in the porches. Jago paid, the taxi door slammed, and then he said: 'This way,' and ushered them up the steps. Inside was a deep rich, *warm,* carpet, and a door either side of the hall. He produced a key, opened the door on the left, and stood back. Tara knew then. But she went in anyway, because she had no choice, and held tight to Fiona's hand.

'This isn't a hotel,' she said, looking around. The apartment was large, with its own hall, and a door leading off.

'No,' Jago agreed. 'It's not. It's my flat.'

'I'm not staying here -' she began. He opened the door and added, as if she hadn't spoken: 'Are - you coming in? The child's tired.'

The living room was spacious and elegant, thickly carpeted, the furniture beautiful and well cared, for, pictures on the walls—the sort

Tara enjoyed looking at—good landscapes, nothing modern or jarring.. But she was too agitated to take it in. She. faced him.

'You know what I mean,' she said as she ushered Fiona into a chair.

'You usually manage to make yourself perfectly clear,' he answered, and the irony was well concealed, but there. 'But I see no point in paying expensive hotel bills for two nights when this place is as well equipped. There are two bedrooms—I'll show you. Twin beds in one—for you both. Bathroom, kitchen, this room. I've got books, colour television—everything you need. Fiona can watch— she's never seen TV in her life. She can see the children's programmes here—she couldn't in a hotel.'

Tara felt as if the ground was slipping away from under her feet. She looked around, saw Fiona's eyes travelling over the room to rest on chairs, bookcases, mirrors on the wall, red velvet curtains at the windows, drawn back to show the faint icy sleet that had just begun. And she knew she had lost. Jago looked at his watch. 'I'm starving. Do you like Chinese, Indian, or just plain old fish and chips?'

She bit her lip. 'Anything—but Fiona's mother gave me a list of her likes and dislikes in food. Just a moment.' She opened her bag and took out the folded sheet of paper, smoothing it open.

She read it quickly, then passed it to him. 'It doesn't say anything about foreign foods—but then I don't suppose they've ever had any. I think she's bettor eating something plain. It says she likes boiled eggs there. Have you any?'

'No, I'll go now and get some in. Do you want to come, or will you wait here?'

'We'll wait.' As if he expected her to choose otherwise!

'All right. I'll switch on television and the fire. I'll bring back milk too, for coffee. If you want any now, there's powdered in the cupboard.'

'No, thanks.' She would wait.

He went round the flat, switched on softly golden- shaded wall lamps, the television and the huge log- effect electric fire. Then he looked round. 'I won't be long.' She heard the outer door of the flat close, and waited to see him go down the steps. Instead there was silence. Faintly, from the back, a door slammed, and Tara realized—a car. Funny, because she had only seen him walking, she had never connected him with driving. But it was logical. The flat was in the suburbs. Wherever he worked—if he did work—and she was beginning to wonder, for what man can take holidays whenever he chooses? There would be a good distance to go. Tara went nearer the window. Not too near—she didn't want to be seen—but (there was silence. There was a park at the end of the road, quite near the house, but it was nearly hidden, for the sleety rain was thickening, and the sky was growing darker and colder.

Tara shivered and turned away. The television had come on, a cartoon film, and Fiona, in the act of taking her coat off, stood transfixed, a look of complete wonder on her face. Tara laughed, and eased the sleeves from those thin arms. She opened the first door, and it was a closet, with coats hanging, so she put both hers and the little girl's in, and went to sit beside Fiona on the settee. After a few minutes of watching the antics of Deputy Dawg, she heard a car outside, and turned to look. It was a black Mercedes sports car, fast, a luxurious vehicle that spoke of money. She saw Jago lean over to pick up a carrier bag from the seat beside him.

She turned away. Well, now she knew. She heard the door slam, heard his footsteps, then the front door—the flat door—and he came

in. Faint white specks were melting on his hair as he took off his anorak and put the carrier bag down on a chair by the door.

'I've got eggs, milk, bread and butter—oh, yes, and cheese. I saw it on the list. And I've brought some mixtures back for us. Would you like to come to the kitchen and sort out what you want?'

'Yes.' She was hungry too, and Fiona must be, but she never asked, never seemed to bother, just accepted what was put in front of her.

They ate in the kitchen, and Fiona bolted down her boiled egg and bread and butter, clearly eager to get back to the magic box of colour that so fascinated her. Jago nodded, and waved his hand towards the door of the living room. 'Yes, Fiona, you may go.'

Then there were just the two of them. He had brought back four foil cartons of Chinese food, and stuffed pancake rolls wrapped in aluminium foil too, and it was all piping hot and quite delicious. Tara helped herself with spoons from each carton, and poured soy sauce, and it would all have been wonderful, except that she was with the wrong person. Just at that moment she was too hungry to care, and she noticed that Jago could put it back very efficiently too. When at last they had finished eating, she had to say what was in her mind.

'You know I' wouldn't have come, don't you, if you'd told me we were going to sleep in your flat?'

'I know.' He was standing by the cooker, watching milk and water boil in a pan. He turned to Tara. 'But in that event I would have booked us in at a hotel. I was determined to get Fiona here, one way or another, and I have.'

'Do you always get your own way?'

"Not always,' and he was turned away as he said it, so she could not see the expression on his face. But the dry ironic tone made her feel warm. Quickly she said: 'What's happening today?'

He turned then. 'Nothing. I mean, not with Fiona. We're going in the morning to my friend's clinic. We'll be there all day most likely, and then come back here, and set off back Wednesday morning to Gaela.'

'You have a strange job that lets you waltz back and forth across the country. Do you actually work?' She knew she was verging on the personal, even the rude, but a reckless impulse made her go on. It was as if she wanted to see how *far* she could *go*. He was busy occupied with pouring coffee into two mugs. Then he turned, set Tara's cup before her, put his own down, and drew up his chair.

'Right,' he said. 'You're obviously bursting to know, so I'll tell you, and when I've finished, if you've any questions to ask, ask them. And in that way, you'll know, won't you?' And he smiled—and she wanted to hit him. There was no humour in it, no warmth, just a movement of his facial muscles— and she was suddenly aware of his extraordinary power and strength, so she sat very still. Because in spite of everything, she really did want to know.

'I do work. Here in Edinburgh, at the University occasionally, where I lecture in psychology—but my main employment is with one of the biggest industrial firms in Europe. I work on a contractual basis—that's to say that provided I do a certain amount in a certain time; when, where, or how I do it is my own business. I compile questionnaires—the type used by many big firms to test that the people *they* want get the right jobs. To put it more simply, I help to fit square pegs into square holes.' He pushed the sugar bowl across to Tara. 'I work on Gaela sometimes during the day. I find the atmosphere there is ideal. I don't practise in psychiatry, nor as a doctor, but I assure you I am qualified in all three fields, and can prove it.

'My grandfather was Angus Cameron, Laird of Gaela; he was an unhappy, bitter old man who turfed my mother out because she wanted to marry a penniless fisherman. After she died, leaving my sister and me living with our father in Cornwall, he must have had a change of heart, and spent thousands tracing us. He left me a small fortune, as well as the Big House on Gaela. So you see, if I wanted, I could move into it tomorrow, and never work again. I might eventually do just that—move into the Big House, I mean. But not to laze. I'm planning to have the house done up and converted into a convalescent home for sick children—those from broken homes, perhaps, or with other mental disturbances. I've got a lot of things to think about before I do it, though.'

He swallowed his coffee and stood up, and for some reason, he was the nearest thing to angry that Tara had ever seen. It puzzled and disturbed her, as had his words. She knew now all about him—or as much as he wanted her to know, and the picture formed was disquieting. He was a single-minded man with a sense of purpose that was almost frightening in its intensity. How could she have ever thought she was anything to him other than a cold statistic? She turned away, unwilling for him to see her face. Carrying her empty beaker to the sink, she said over her shoulder: 'Thank you for telling me.'

'No questions?' Mockery tinged the query.

'No.' She looked at the table. 'Shall I wash up?'

'No. You're my guest. Go and join Fiona. I'll show you your room after.'

Without another word Tara went out of the kitchen.

Fiona was nearly asleep at half past seven, her head heavy as she tried to watch the television, eyes_ drooping.

'Come on, love,' said Tara, touching her on the shoulder. 'Bedtime.' She pulled the rolled-up pyjamas from the top of the bag and took the little girl into the bedroom. Minutes after that, she was tucked snugly in bed.

It was later that an odd, disturbing thing happened, and it jolted Tara once again.

The television was on, and she had been idly watching it because she didn't want to read—and certainly didn't want- to talk to Jago.

He went out at nine to put his car away. The sleet had stopped, and the ground outside appeared to be covered with a grey slippery slush, and she shivered at the sight of it as she stood by the window for a moment. She wondered what her parents were doing--and how surprised they would be if they knew she was in Edinburgh, less than two hundred and fifty miles from home. Jago had a phone, and she decided to ask him when he returned, if she could call them. She looked around her and saw Fiona's 'luggage', still on the chair, forgotten, and went over to see what the child was to wear the following day.

Gently she lifted out the clothes and looked at them, and a lump came into her throat. There was a clean pair of grey socks, well worn and darned, clean vest and pants, and a warm dress. It was the dress that brought the sudden tears to Tara's eyes. Clearly a hand-me-down, it was of brown wool, very plain, with an embroidered flower on a pocket— and something told Tara that this was Fiona's best one. She didn't hear the door open, or the footsteps. In her mind was a picture of Fiona tomorrow, as she would look, and a rush of sadness overwhelmed her. Poor little scrap! What had she ever had out of

life? Love and affection, yes, undoubtedly, but precious little else, certainly not the help she so badly needed, or the understanding.

Tara laid the dress on the chair and covered her face with her hands.

'What is it? Tara?' Suddenly she was being turned round, and she started violently and tried to pull herself free.

'Oh!' But she couldn't speak, and the tears came freely now as Jago lifted her hands from her face, She shook her head wordlessly.

'Are you ill?'

She managed to compose herself sufficiently to nod towards the dress on the chair. 'It's that—her clothes. I was just looking at them, and thinking.'

'I see.' He spoke quite gently, and without more words she knew that he understood. 'If I hadn't made them believe that Fiona's train fares would be paid by the National Health Service, they wouldn't have let her come. They're proud as well as poor, Tara.'

She fumbled in the pocket of her grey trouser suit for a hanky, and found it. She turned away quickly then. The moment of intimacy must not last. 'I think I'll go to bed—I'm tired,' she said, 'I may read for a while. Have you any fiction?'

'Over there. Help yourself.' And for a moment she was reminded of that dreadful time at his house on Gaela. She went over to the bookcase and knelt down.

'May I make a phone call to my parents?' she said, and half turned.

'Surely. You know where it is. If you're going to phone, then get ready for bed, you won't mind if I go across the hall to visit a friend, will you?'

'Mind! 'No, of course not.'

'It's the door facing mine. If you need anything— anything at all— knock. I'll be there.'

'I will. Thank you.' But she didn't turn when she said it, and she waited for him to go.

She fell asleep before he came back from his neighbour's .flat, and in the morning when she woke she wondered where she was, then sat up quickly. She was in Edinburgh, sleeping in the flat of *that* man. And he had shown a faint, disturbing trace of humanity again the previous night, which was disconcerting to say the least. She didn't want him to be human. It was much easier if he just stayed the way she expected him to be.

She crept out of bed to see Fiona, and check the time on her watch. It was not quite seven, and she wanted a cup of coffee more than anything. But she had no dressing gown, and her coat was in a cupboard in the living room, and she could have kicked herself for not thinking of *that!*

She looked down at her nightie. Two layers of filmy nylon, and although short, it was adequate. Quickly out of the bedroom on bare feet that buried themselves in the lush carpet she crept, and into the living room where she reached the door of the cupboard—and looked up to see Jago watching her from the kitchen doorway. He was fully dressed in matching black sweater and trousers.

She said quickly: 'I came for my coat -' and reached in for it, to slide it on. Then she could look at him. 'I wanted a cup of coffee,' she said breathlessly.

'I've just made tea. Want some? Or must it be coffee?'

She buttoned the coat up. 'Tea will do, thanks. Are you always up so early?' It was easier to talk than just stand there. His face had been devoid of expression when he had been watching her.

'No. But I have things to do before we go. There won't be time tomorrow. Did I wake you?'

'No—I don't think so. Fiona's fast asleep. Will— will these tests be at all—disturbing for her ?'

'Nothing will hurt. Shell be X-rayed, given a comprehensive medical, tested to check her reflexes, and so on—all the things to try and eliminate what's not causing her problem. She'll also have a very detailed hearing examination. There are parts of that I would prefer you to stay out of—but I'll be there all the time, don't worry. I'll be with her.'

Tara took a deep breath. 'I wanted to be sure,' she said slowly. She closed her eyes for a moment. Jago poured out two cups of tea and handed her one.

'Toast? I'm doing some.'

'Please.' She sat down at the red formica-topped table and spooned sugar in the cup. 'What will happen if you're right—and there's nothing wrong with her except deafness ?'

'She'll have to go to a special school for a few years. I think she's above average intelligence. I'm sure she'll be able to lead a normal life eventually.'

'Could there be any hope in an operation?'

He shrugged. 'Obviously that's something Kirk will want to discover.'

'Kirk?'

'John Kirk. The specialist friend we're seeing today.'

There was a faint but distinctive smell, and he turned to the grill with a muttered oath, and pulled out two pieces of toast with blackened edges.

'I don't mind it well done,' Tara said quickly. 'And then I'll go and get washed.'

'No hurry. We don't leave until nine. I'll be working in my bedroom when I've eaten, so you can get ready in your own time.'

He put more bread under the grill, and Tara slowly began to butter that which was already done. She was beginning now, at last, to realize all the precise implications of what was to happen today.

Tara smiled at the pretty young nurse who brought her tea.

'Sorry, no biscuits,' she said, as she passed it to Tara. 'But there's a chocolate machine in reception hall -

'No, thanks, this is fine,' Tara smiled. She had stayed with Fiona for the preliminary medical, and now she and Jago had gone off together, leaving Tara in a clean, warm, and completely impersonal waiting room of the modern clinic where Dr Kirk was apparently one of the brighter stars.

Magazines were piled on a table beside her, and she put the cup and saucer down on them, conscious of slightly disapproving—or envious—glances from several other waiting people, who perhaps felt that what was good for one should be good for all. It didn't matter. Tara looked down at her feet, unable to read—for her

thoughts were with Fiona, and what was happening to her. She must be frightened—she *must* be, for to her all this must be strange—and there was no way of explaining to her, as you could with a normal child, and reassuring her. Tara bit her lip, seeing Jago's face as he had told Tara it would be better for her to wait until she was wanted, for they were going to do the very delicate hearing tests—and concentration was essential.

They had been in Dr Kirk's office at the time. Fiona, swathed in multicoloured terry towelling robe, was sitting on Jago's knee, her arms round his neck, eyes intent on his face, trusting him completely. Almost as if, Tara thought suddenly, she knew he was helping her—without words being said.

He had said: 'We'll be an hour or more. I'll be with her *all the time*—but I'd prefer you to be in the waiting room until we send for you.'

'All right' She watched his hands on Fiona's shoulders, strong hands, that had felled a bully; gentle hands that could hold a child—or a woman— and not hurt them—and she had to look away. The door opened, the moment passed, and John Kirk, a thin, voluble Scot, came in and nodded. 'We're right now, Jago.' He grinned at Tara. 'And wipe that look off your face, lassie, we'll no' hurt her.'

'I know,' she had smiled faintly at him. 'I'll go in the waiting room ...'

Now she straightened her legs. She realized, suddenly, almost with a sense of shock, that she had not once, since leaving Gaela, been conscious of her scar, or indeed her limp. And she suddenly knew why they didn't matter any more—because she had someone else to think about. A helpless girl, Fiona, and if it didn't matter now, then it needn't matter ever again. And Tara lifted her hand to her hair, to smooth it away from her face, and she knew she was free.

It was bitterly cold when they came out into the car park at the front of the clinic.

Jago looked at Fiona, who was shivering slightly. 'Stay there, I'll go and fetch the car.' And he ran down the steps and along the rows of parked vehicles until he reached his own.

A few minutes later, with Fiona snugly tucked up in the back of the powerful car, they were driving along the road home—then Tara looked round as Jago turned left instead of keeping straight on. Before she could speak, he said: 'We're going to the shops.'

'Oh,' she sat back again and turned to see Fiona snugly sitting in the narrow space at the back, tucked in a rug, and she smiled at her.

'Was she good ?' she asked.

'Very. No temper, no tears—nothing. It was as if she *knew.'*

'Yes,' Tara agreed, remembering the office. 'I think you're right.' He had said nothing about the tests, but she had to ask one question. 'Can—can they do anything for her ?'

'Yes. There's a lot of information to be fed into a computer, and those X-rays to be checked—but John says definitely. He agrees with me. She's very intelligent.'

Tara let out her breath in a long sigh of relief. .'Oh, I'm so glad!' Tears sprang to her eyes. Jago was too busy concentrating on the thickening traffic to look at her, but he sensed her mood. And he smiled slightly, but he said nothing.

It was not until they were in one of the larger and more exclusive Princes Street stores that Tara began to wonder why they had come. She had vaguely imagined he needed food—but they were in the children's wear department, and Jago looked at her. 'I'm going to buy

this poor kid a coat,' he said. 'Will you help? I'm sure you've a better idea than me -' then, seeing Tara's face, he added: 'Don't say it. I'll cope with the parents when we get back—tell 'em I got it on the National Health or something,' and he. grinned down at Fiona, who smiled back.

'Yes. I'll help.' She looked down at the shabby coat Fiona wore, a grey one, nearly threadbare at the elbows. 'A tweed one would be best, I think.'

'I'll leave it to you. Look, I'll sit here and have a cigarette while you wander around, okay?'

Tara took hold of the little girl's hand and they went off, leaving Jago to sit down gingerly on a gilt- backed chair that looked as if it might collapse under his weight.

Strange emotions churned inside Tara. Her heart beat loudly and fast, because he wasn't really so impersonal, so *uninvolved,* after all, was he? She knew it now, and was disturbed.

Fiona didn't understand what was happening at first, but soon began to enjoy herself with each coat that she tried on, then paraded in front of a mirror. And when Tara put on the warm lovat tweed, she knew right away that it was perfect. It fitted splendidly, had a good hem, deep pockets—and Fiona looked up at her as if to say: 'Please—this one ?*

But it was nearly fifteen pounds, and she swallowed. Taking a deep breath, she went over to Jago with Fiona proudly walking beside her and said: 'You didn't say how much we could—er—go up to.'

'No, because it didn't matter. Is this the one?'

'Yes. We both like it. Do you?'

'Looks fine to me, but I'm no judge.'

Tara held up the price ticket on the sleeve, and he winced. 'I'm in the wrong business I can see. Right, we'll have it. She can keep it on.' He lifted a finger and a black-dressed saleswoman glided over oozing smiles.

-And then they were outside, walking along Princes Street with Fiona in the middle, and Jago stopped outside a restaurant. 'Are you hungry?'

'Yes,' Tara nodded. They had eaten in the staff canteen at the clinic, but that had been at noon. It was now nearly five-thirty, and the streets were thronged not only with shoppers, but with workers hurrying home. Jago's Mercedes was in a car park near the station, and Tara saw the evening stretching ahead blankly, for what was there to do now, except wait for morning, and the train back to Gaela? -

'Then we'll eat here. They do good food.'

They went in, Jago opening the door for Tara and Fiona, following them in, and now Tara walked proudly with her head held high, and she didn't mind if he noticed the difference. She would never be ashamed again, never brush her hair forward in case anyone saw, or make the effort to disguise the limp. It wasn't important. She was herself again, a whole person. And she would tell Lalla tomorrow. Then she would finish typing the Damien Corbett book, and go home. For she knew that Lalla hadn't needed *her* as much as she had needed Lalla. And she couldn't stay any longer on Gaela with Jago as a next-door neighbour.

It was nearly ten, Fiona was fast asleep, had been for hours, and Tara was watching a play on television. Jago had gone to the neighbour's flat, because Tara had insisted, after a phone call had come for him, and he had asked would she mind if he went with a message from a mutual friend.

'Look,' she had said, 'if you want to visit your neighbour, please do. There's a play I particularly want to see—didn't think I'd get the chance when I read about it in the paper last week -' and she had watched him go with a great sense of relief.

But now, as the play neared its close, she heard Fiona cry out, and went immediately in to her. As she did, the girl sat up in bed and started sobbing loudly.

'All right, love, I'm here,' Tara soothed her, but looked worriedly at the door. If only he could hear —but the walls were too thick. She switched on the light, said: 'I'll go for Jago -' knowing that Fiona couldn't understand anyway, but she had to try. She ran out quickly, leaving all doors open, knocked loudly on the door opposite, and waited, biting her lip.

A tall blonde girl opened the door a few inches. 'Why—hello?' she began, puzzled, as Tara tried to Collect her wits. She had expected a man. But there was no time to wonder now—'time later perhaps.

'It's Fiona—she's upset—can Jago come over?'

'Oh, it's you! Sorry, love—Jago,' she turned back to Tara. 'He'll not be a moment. Will you come in?'

But Tara was already retreating. 'No, I'll get back to her. Thank you -' and she fled. And it wasn't until later that she realized the girl had been wearing a dressing gown over a nightie.

Fiona soon settled down after an aspirin and warm milk. Jago looked down at the sleeping girl, her face still slightly flushed.

'Over-excitement,' he said succinctly. 'She's had a very busy day, don't forget. She'll be as right as rain in the morning.' He looked at his watch again— there had been, thought Tara, something very *professional* about the way he had looked at it before, when he was taking Fiona's pulse—but he was, of course, wasn't he?

'Mmm, I won't go back now. Too late. Want any supper?'

'No, thanks.' Tara's mouth was dry, and her throat ached. She didn't want to look at him. What he did was his own business, of course, but the girl had looked like an old friend—and why not, if they were neighbours? But there was a numb coldness inside her that would not go away, even after she had gone to bed. Shelay awake for ages, listening to the distant sounds of traffic before falling asleep. And now she knew she had to get away from Gaela, away from Jago Black, as soon as possible.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE was so much to tell Lalla—and so much more that could not be said, and never would. For Tara knew what had happened to her now, and the knowledge was upsetting. She was nearly at the end of the book, and it would be nice to have it finished. It wouldn't be running away, for she was now cured of what had been troubling her when she had arrived on that misty isle not so long ago. And perhaps thoughts of Jago would fade like that mist in time too—perhaps...

Tara carefully avoided seeing him, and as he wasn't going to try and teach Fiona until the results of her many tests came through, Tara didn't have to make any excuses not to go. For she could not, would not, stay with him, not even for a short length of time.

He had accidentally touched her hand when they had been getting off the ferry on their return to Gaela, and that slight contact had sent dizzy spirals of sweet pain shafting through her.

Tara had steeled herself to type quicker than before. She could not wait to get away—and yet she didn't want to go straight home. She felt the need to be alone, to have a kind of breathing space of perhaps a few days before she faced her parents, and stood tall and straight, to let them see that it was all all right now.

Lalla was, as always, sensible and to the point. 'Why,' she said, as she watched Tara pack, 'don't you stay somewhere in a hotel for a few days? I know a super one just a few miles outside Inverness — country mansion, a mile from the road—quiet and comfortable. You'd get your mind adjusted to going home and finding a job again.'

'You're an angel! A wonderful person, Lalla— and I'll come again as soon as I can—as long as h-he's not here.' Tara bit her lip. *'You* understand, don't you, Lalla?'

'Yes, I understand,' and on the other woman's face came a softly reminiscent look. 'And I promise, before you ask *again*, that I won't tell *him* where you've gone—that is, of course, always supposing he even asks.'

Tara gave a slight smile. 'I don't think he'll even know I've gone,' she admitted. 'He's got a plate full with Fiona and her parents now. Oh, but he was marvellous with her.'

'That I can well believe. Well, I'll away to my writing. Shout if you want me, dear.' And she went out and left Tara alone to her thoughts.

The hotel was nice, and everything, that Lalla had promised. The ideal place for a honeymoon, thought Tara, suppressing a pang at the idea. She had had to take a bus from Inverness to the village, and walk nearly a mile up the drive—but it was 'worth it. Gradually she adjusted to her new state, and ate, not well, but enough, and went for tiring walks, and into the village before tumbling into bed that second night utterly exhausted.

She knew Jago had not seen her go, perhaps didn't even know yet of her departure. For on the morning when the taxi came to take her to the ferry with Lalla, she had seen Jago striding off up the hill just after breakfast, and had touched her lips with her fingers and blown him a faint kiss of farewell. Unwitnessed, unseen, unheard her brief words, softly said: 'Goodbye—my love.' Only her to know,, and she had watched him go, and had to blink furiously at the agonizing pain. But it would go. It would fade as surely as the pain of David, only quicker, and she would start a new life soon enough, at home.,

The next morning Tara bathed, and went down to breakfast late. It was a fine cold day, and there was a good bookshop in the village that she wanted to browse round. She wondered if Lalla had given

Jago the money yet. She had roughly estimated the costs of her journey, and food, and written out a cheque, and put it into an envelope. She had given Lalla strict instructions not to give it to him until he called at her house. Otherwise he might think she *wanted* him to know she had gone—and she didn't, of course.

She set off walking, and was half way down the main village street when she saw the church door open, and she stood still, remembering the last time she had been in church, on Gaela, and had seen Jago ... And now it would be nice to reflect quietly for a few minutes on what had happened since.

As she walked slowly up the path, the bus from Inverness passed down the road; she heard it, but. didn't look round. In a few days she would go on that bus herself, back to the city, for a train— home...

The inside was cool, quiet, and beautiful, a sharp contrast to that sad little shed on Gaela. Tara went and sat in a pew, half way down, and let the peace of the place wash over her, and wondered if the dry sharp pain of unrequited love would go away. Gradually her mind grew calmer, and the thought of Jago, the memory of his face—his good kind face, became clearer, yet strangely less painful. And she turned quite slowly, because something *made* her, and she saw him standing just inside the doorway, watching her. She thought for a moment that she must be dreaming, and made a soft sound, then he was walking towards her, smiling, and was beside her in the pew, and turning towards her, his hands going out to touch her face as he said:

'Hello, Tara.' Still unbelieving, she lifted her hand, to touch, to see if this was *real*, and he caught and held it, then raised it to his mouth, and gently kissed her palm. 'I love you, Tara,' he said, and somehow the words were no longer unbelievable, but *right.*

'And I love you—I always have,' she answered softly. 'But how did you know I was h-here?'

He looked round, softly, taking it all in. I've got a lot to tell you,' he said. 'And I want to kiss you— but I can't here. Come, let's go outside.' And he stood up and held out his hand for her to take. Together they walked out into the cold sunlight, and then, outside, he took her in his arms and kissed her. 'Let's go back to your hotel,' he said, 'and talk.'

'Anything you say.' Tara was still too dazed to think.

There in the large empty lounge with its many settees and rugs, and a huge fire roaring up the chimney, he told her what Lalla had done.

'I asked her—but she wouldn't tell me where you'd gone until I told her what I've just told you,' he said. 'And she said she'd promised you not to tell, and then she dropped a card on the floor, and I picked it up—and it was the name and address of this hotel. So I assured her that I would respect her promise—and pocketed the card. That was last night. I got the first train this morning.'

'Oh, Jago,' she leaned against him, and he put his arm tightly round her. 'And I knew I loved you when we were in Edinburgh, but then—then—that g-girl opened the door opposite, and I knew she was -' she stopped. He began to laugh.

'Sally? You didn't let me introduce you, did you? She lives with her husband—they're both at the University, so I know them well. I was talking to him while she had a bath or something.'

'Oh, Jago!'

'Listen, Tara, before we go any further. Those notes—I want to tell -'

'No,' she twisted slightly round. 'I was a fool—it doesn't matter, truly -'

'But it does—and I'm going to tell you now.' He moved his arm so that it held her more securely. 'Listen, the first time I saw you—the very first time, on the train—with those youths, I wanted to ***kill*** them, and had to just look, as if it were nothing. I wanted to help you then—also, with my training, it's instinctive to take notes, to get things down on paper—you can see everything more clearly then—so I made notes. All right, because as well, I knew even then that I was strongly attracted to you—and I knew that before I got too close to see things in perspective I had to get it all down in black and white -' he stopped and rubbed his face. 'Oh, what the hell! I'm putting it badly. But the point I want to make is this—those jottings were finished. I was going to burn them because I suspect Morag goes through my desk occasionally—and she came in as I took them out of the drawer, so I pushed them between two books. She *never* touches my books—a bit frightened of them, I think—and Fiona was with her. That was why it went out of my head. But you know, don't you, that I wouldn't have hurt you for the world. I've never wanted to hurt you—*ever*— and never will. Do you believe me?'

'Jago, you make me ashamed. What can I say? Everything you've done has been -' she shrugged helplessly, 'has been *right.* You're a wonderful person, and I don't—I don't -' and she stopped, too near to tears to go on.

'Oh, my darling, my precious little idiot. Don't you know? Don't you think I know how you feel? All I've ever wanted to hear from you was those words you said in church—that you loved me too, and beside that, nothing matters. Will you marry me and live in the Big House? Will you, Tara? If you want me to get down on my knees and do it properly, I will -'

'Oh, Jago. Yes! And no, don't kneel on that rug-— you'll get covered in dog hairs -' her next words were lost as Jago proceeded to silence her in a most effective and delicious way. They didn't even see the

proprietress come in to tell them lunch was ready. She took one look, smiled, and went out again, closing the door very softly behind her.